

Egypt

Egypt is undeniably one of the world's great travel destinations and many of its wondrous sights need no introduction. It is for this very reason, however, that while horse-riding, tomb-raiding and desert safari are all possible, the chances of your enjoying them alone (particularly given the vigilant police protection occasioned by recent events) is minimal. Nor is this a new phenomenon. Even in the 19th century, a writer commented peevishly on the number of pleasure boats cruising the Nile.

This continues to be the reality of Egypt's great sights: for half the year they are overcrowded and beset by overenthusiastic hawkers and guides, and for the other half, they are too hot to handle. Forewarned is forearmed, however, and for many people the best of Egypt is realised not so much through the iconic spectacle of ancient monuments, great though they are, but by chats with a taxi driver, the surprise gathering of a thousand egrets in the trees along the Nile, or hearing a nation in prayer at sunset.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 997,739 sq km
- **ATMs** In most large towns
- **Borders** Libya, Sudan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories
- **Budget** US\$50 per day (winter); US\$30 per day (summer)
- **Capital** Cairo
- **Language** Arabic
- **Money** Egyptian pound; US\$1 = £6
- **Population** 78.9 million
- **Seasons** Winter/high season (October to April); summer/low season (May to September)
- **Telephone** country code ☎ 20; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT +2
- **Visa** Required for citizens of most countries



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Cairo** (p86) Witness life and death in epic proportions in this carpet-weaving, film-making city of pyramids.
- **White Desert** (p109) Visit extraordinary landscapes predating the Pharaohs.
- **Sinai** (p98) Explore the sculpted interior and coral-garden fringe of Egypt's Bedouin heartland.
- **Nile Cruise** (p94) Enjoy intimate views of riverside life crowned by the splendours of Thebes.
- **Sound-and-light show at Abu Simbel** (p119) Be dazzled by modern imagery projected across resurrected temple stones.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

From December to February, Lower Egypt (Cairo and north) is often overcast and chilly, with regular downpours of rain in Alexandria, and below-zero temperatures at night in Sinai, while Upper Egypt (south of Cairo) is warm with clear, blue skies.

Between June and September, temperatures range from 31°C on the Mediterranean coast to an unbearable 50°C in Aswan.

The best time to visit is in spring (March to April) or autumn (October and November) when you should pack for hot weather in the south and include a light jacket for the north.

ITINERARIES

- **Three Days** Be seduced by the pyramids at the sound-and-light show (p119); chart the origins of ancient Egypt in Memphis (p98) and Saqqara (p98); go swapping old lamps for new in Islamic Cairo (p90) and flex the ocular muscles at a belly-dancing venue (p96).
- **Two Weeks** When you've exhausted Cairo, take the overnight train to Luxor (p111) and wake up in Thebes (p111) for three days of tomb and temple visiting. Then lounge on a boat to Aswan (p116) visiting Edfu (p116) and Kom Ombo (p116) en route, and make time to savour Abu Simbel (p119) by night.
- **One Month** Fly back to Luxor and retrace the old caravan route through the oases of the Western Desert (p108), allowing three days to chill in the coffeehouses of Alexandria (p105), or swim with angel fish at the Red Sea resort of Dahab (p99). There's also time to listen for commandments on Mt Sinai (p100), become a

HOW MUCH?

- **Cup of tea** US\$0.55
- **Newspaper** US\$0.10
- **Small inlaid box** US\$6
- **Camel ride** per hour US\$4.50
- **Museum admission** US\$7

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$0.85
- **1L bottled water** US\$0.50
- **Bottle of Stella** US\$1.80
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$5.20
- **Fuul sandwich** US\$0.10

boat-spotter by the Suez Canal (p102) and sample dates in Siwa oasis (p108).

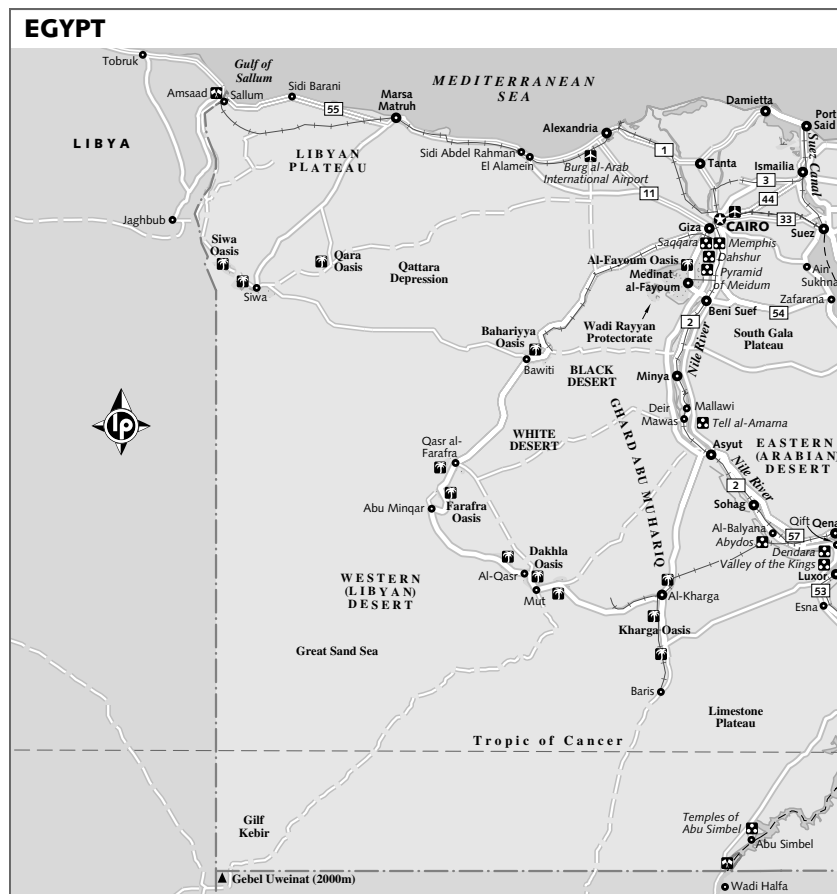
HISTORY Life on the Nile

Most of Egypt's landmass consists of deserts, with the nation's lifeblood, the Nile River, a green band shivering along the length of the country, drawing to it the nation's settlements, including the disproportionately large capital, Cairo. Charismatic rivers flow through many cities in the world but few govern the ebb and flow of a country's fortunes quite as significantly as the Nile has shaped Egypt and its shifting capitals of the Delta.

From at least 4000 BC, small settlements clung together in loose affiliations along the Nile, developing into two important states. The delta area in the north became known as Lower Egypt, and the area upstream of the delta was called Upper Egypt. The unification of these two states, around 3100 BC, by the Pharaoh Menes sewed the seeds for the flowering of ancient Egyptian civilisation.

Old, Middle & New Kingdoms

Ancient Egyptian history comprises three principal kingdoms. The pyramids date from the Old Kingdom (2670–2150 BC), when lively trade made ambitious building projects possible. Ruling from the nearby capital of Memphis, Pharaoh Zoser and his chief architect, Imhotep, built the pyramid at Saqqara. Subsequent Pharaohs constructed ever larger temples and pyramids, culminating in the



mighty pyramids of Giza built for Cheops, Chephren and Mycerinus.

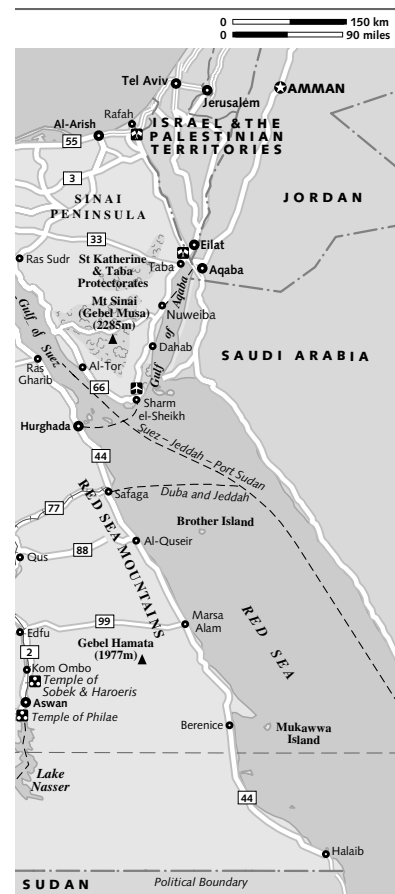
The Middle Kingdom (2056–1650 BC) was marked by the rise of a new and illustrious capital at Thebes (Luxor). It was during the New Kingdom (1550–1076 BC), however, that ancient Egyptian culture blossomed. Wonders such as the Temple of Karnak and the West Bank tombs were the visible expression of a rich culture that established Egypt, under the great dynasties of Tuthmosis and Ramses, as the greatest regional power.

From Alexander to Independence

From 1184 BC, Egypt disintegrated into local principalities and it wasn't until Alexander the Great arrived in the 4th century BC that

the country was reunited. For the next 300 years Egypt was ruled from Alexandria by the descendants of his general, Ptolemy. The Romans arrived in 31 BC, leaving behind little to show for their occupation except the introduction of Christianity in AD 2.

In AD 640, Arab armies brought Islam to Egypt. With it came a cultural revival and the foundation of Cairo in AD 969 by the Fatimid dynasty. Arts and sciences flourished and trade brought wealth into the country. The Turks found the prize irresistible, and in the early 16th century, Egypt became part of the Ottoman Empire. The French followed suit in the 19th century under Napoleon, and the British made Egypt a protectorate during WWI.



tremists, declaring a state of emergency that continues until today.

While Mubarak has been canny in rehabilitating Egypt's relations with Arab states without abandoning the treaty with Israel, he has not been so successful in domestic policy. The 1980s were marked by violence, partly in response to the country's dismal economic situation. Between 1993 and 1997, Egypt's largest Islamist opposition group targeted foreign travellers in its campaign to overthrow the government, culminating in the massacre of 58 holidaymakers at the Funerary Temple of Hatshepsut in Luxor.

Egypt Today

The Luxor massacre destroyed grass-roots support for militant groups and a period of calm ensued until October 2004, when a bomb at Taba, on the border with Israel, killed 34. Mubarak introduced some democratic measures but not enough to appease militant groups. After sporadic violence in Cairo, three bombs at Sharm el-Sheikh killed 64 people, mostly Egyptians. Various groups claimed responsibility and tourism suffered temporarily. In April 2006 three further bombs claimed 23 lives in Dahab, proving that the situation is far from resolved.

Egypt is in serious economic turmoil, and with an ever-burgeoning population, rising unemployment, and a decline in tourism resulting from continuing violence, the future looks precarious.

CULTURE

Egyptians are often teased by neighbouring nationals for being work-shy (Gulf Arabs call a siesta 'Egyptian PT'). The 'insha'allah' (God willing) mentality translates as 'Why do today what you can put off until tomorrow?' Emphasis is placed instead on quality family and social experience rather than on the secondary task of earning a living.

Nonetheless, the country functions, crops are harvested and the great building projects throughout the ages, from Saqqara to Suez, show that the industry of some more than compensates for the lethargy of others.

Despite the emancipated lifestyles depicted in popular Cairo soaps, most families in Egypt live a conservative life based on traditional Islamic values. It may not look like it, but for most urban households, women rule the roost. They are expected to keep house and

After nearly 2000 years of colonisation, revolution resulted in self-rule in 1952. Nasser became Egypt's first president in 1956, establishing his authority by buying out French and British claims to the Suez Canal but losing the 1967 war with Israel. His successor, Sadat, concluded the second war with Israel with the controversial 1979 Camp David Agreement. Widely blamed for betraying pan-Arabist principles, Sadat was assassinated in 1981.

Life After Sadat

Sadat's assassin was a member of Islamic Jihad, a terrorist organisation aiming to establish an Islamic state in Egypt. Sadat's successor, Mubarak, retaliated against the ex-

govern children, but men are kept in abeyance on a wish and a promise and are very often seen as a resource. Women who work are entitled to keep their money rather than share it with their husbands.

The huge discrepancy between rich and poor is the main source of political tension.

PEOPLE

Egypt has the second-highest population in Africa. Growing at a rate of 2% annually, it places enormous strain on infrastructure and the national economy. Unemployment is officially 10%; unofficially it's much higher.

There are three main racial groups: the Hamito-Semites of the Nile (including the Berbers of Siwa in the Western Desert); Bedouin Arab nomads, who migrated from Arabia and live mostly in Sinai; and the Nubians, who inhabit the Aswan area.

About 94% of Egypt's population is Muslim; the remainder is Coptic Christian. The two communities peacefully coexist. Magic plays a role in many people's lives.

ARTS & CRAFTS

Thirty years after her death, Umm Kolthum is still the classical voice of Egypt.

Ahmed Adawiyya is the founding father of *al-jeel* (the generation) and *shaabi* (popular), both forms of repetitive, disposable pop made internationally likeable by his successor, Hakim. Amr Diab is an equally popular male star, with sophisticated production and accessible rhythms that have helped bring Arabic music to a wider audience.

Somewhat ignored locally, but fêted abroad, Nubian music has a warm sound with simple melodies. The most famous exponent is Ali Hassan Kuban.

The work of the recently deceased Nobel prize-winner Naguib Mahfouz is revered in Arabic literature for its profound expression of Egyptian life and language. His works include *The Cairo Trilogy* and *Children of the Alley*, still banned in Egypt as blasphemous.

Nawal al-Saadawi's works include *Woman at Point Zero* and *The Hidden Face of Eve* (banned in Egypt). Ahdaf Soueif also tackles taboo subjects; she writes in English and her *The Map of Love* was short listed for the prestigious Booker Prize.

Egypt has many traditional craft industries, such as silk carpet weaving, copper and brass beating, inlaid woodwork, papyrus painting,

alabaster work and fine cotton production. Unfortunately, much of the work in the tourist shops of Giza and Luxor is of poor quality and master craftsmen are hard to locate.

ENVIRONMENT

Egypt's central feature is the Nile Valley, either side of which are barren plateaus punctuated by occasional escarpments and oases. The highest mountains are Mt Sinai (Gebel Musa; 2285m) and Mt St Katherine (Gebel Katrin; 2637m), in the Sinai Peninsular.

Environmental awareness is not top priority in Egypt: Cairo is thick with smog; the Red Sea coast is threatened by opportunistic development and freshwater lakes are blighted by agricultural toxins.

On a positive note, there are now 21 protected areas throughout Egypt and 19 more proposed, and the government is beginning to encourage responsible tourism.

FOOD & DRINK

A combination of Arabic and Mediterranean influences, Egypt's cuisine is focused on minced, seasoned meat, locally made cheese and fresh vegetables such as tomatoes and aubergines. Staples include *fuul* (fava beans cooked with oil and lemon), *ta'amiyya* (felfel), *kushari* (mixture of noodles, rice and lentils) and unleavened bread. Not surprisingly, fish (like Nile perch and sea bream) is an important part of the diet.

Birds (as you'll note from the doves) form an integral part of Egyptian culture, and pigeon – stuffed with rice and raisins – is a popular delicacy.

Although beer and arrak are produced locally, fresh fruit juices are the favoured drink. Sweet mint tea and Turkish coffee are indispensable punctuations to any social interaction.

CAIRO

☎ 02 / pop 11 million

In many ways, Cairo is Egypt, a top-heavy capital that dominates the country as it dominates Arabic culture, a magnet that draws people from subsistence livelihoods along the Nile Valley towards promises of a better life. What they find when they arrive among the chaos and charisma of Cairo depends on their luck and *wusta* (contacts/influence).

Visitors tend to enjoy Cairo in proportion to their tolerance levels. On a hot summer's

day, surrounded by a mangle of horn-blowing cars, buried under clouds of exhaust fumes, elbowed into the crowd, and tricked into being guided where you didn't want to go, it takes a special patience to enjoy the city.

But there's another side to Cairo: quite apart from the world-class attractions of the pyramids, Egyptian museum and Islamic treasures, there are boulevards of flame trees; overhanging balconies befitting of a Roberts lithograph; and splashes of sunlight glancing off brass lamps. In quiet contrast to the city, the Nile flows equally through fashionable suburb and island allotment, past the mausoleums of the dead now occupied by the living and alongside luxury hotels and floating palaces.

HISTORY

In terms of Egypt's history, Cairo is a relatively modern capital, founded in AD 969 by the Islamic Fatimid dynasty over the ruins of earlier Roman and Islamic settlements. Much of the Fatimid city remains today: the great mosque and university of Al-Azhar are still important Islamic resource centres, while the gates of Bab an-Nasr, Bab al-Futuh and Bab Zuweila straddle the city's main thoroughfares.

Despite spilling beyond its walls, Cairo remained a medieval city at heart for 900 years. It wasn't until the mid-19th century that it started to change significantly.

Before the 1860s, Cairo extended west as far as what is today Midan Opera, surrounded by a swampy plain flooded annually by the Nile. In 1863 French-educated Ismail came to power, inviting architects from Europe to design a modern Cairo beside the old Islamic city. The building boom set in place continues today, with the city's boundaries constantly expanding into the surrounding desert.

Although the pyramids are now almost engulfed by the city, they more properly belong to the capital of ancient Egypt at Memphis, 22km to the south.

ORIENTATION

It may be vast, but Cairo is surprisingly easy to navigate. Midan Tahrir is the centre. Northeast of Tahrir is Downtown, a busy commercial district centred on Sharia Talaat Harb. This is where most budget hotels and restaurants are clustered. Midan Ramses, the city's main train station, marks the northern end of Downtown.

The eastern end of Downtown is at Midan Ataba, on the edge of Islamic Cairo. With Khan al-Khalili bazaar at its core, this is the ebullient, medieval heart of Cairo.

In the middle of the Nile is the island neighbourhood of Zamalek, historically favoured by ruling colonials and still a relatively upmarket enclave with foreign residents, midrange hotels and interesting restaurants and bars.

Heavy on concrete and light on charm, the west bank of the Nile is mostly residential. Giza stretches 20km either side of Pyramids Rd (Sharia al-Haram) that ends, as expected, at the foot of the Pyramids.

Maps

The American University in Cairo Press publishes *Cairo Maps: the Practical Guide* (££30), a collection of 40 street maps with index.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

American University in Cairo (AUC) Bookshop (Map pp92-3; ☎ 797 5370; Sharia Mohammed Mahmoud, Downtown; ☎ 9am-6pm Sat-Thu)

Diwan (Map pp88-9; ☎ 736 2578; 159 Sharia 26th of July, Zamalek; ☎ 9am-11.30pm)

Lehnert & Landrock (Map pp92-3; 44 Sharia Sherif, Downtown; ☎ 9.30am-2pm & 4-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-2pm Sat) There's a convenient branch opposite the Egyptian Museum.

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 123)

Fire department (☎ 180)

Police (☎ 122)

Tourist police (☎ 126)

Internet Access

4U Internet Café (Map pp92-3; ☎ 575 9304; 1st fl, 8 Midan Talaat Harb, Downtown; per hr E£5; ☎ 24hr)

Hany Internet Cafe (Map pp92-3; ☎ 395 1985; 16 Sharia Abdel Khalek Sarwat, Downtown; per hr E£3; ☎ 24hr)

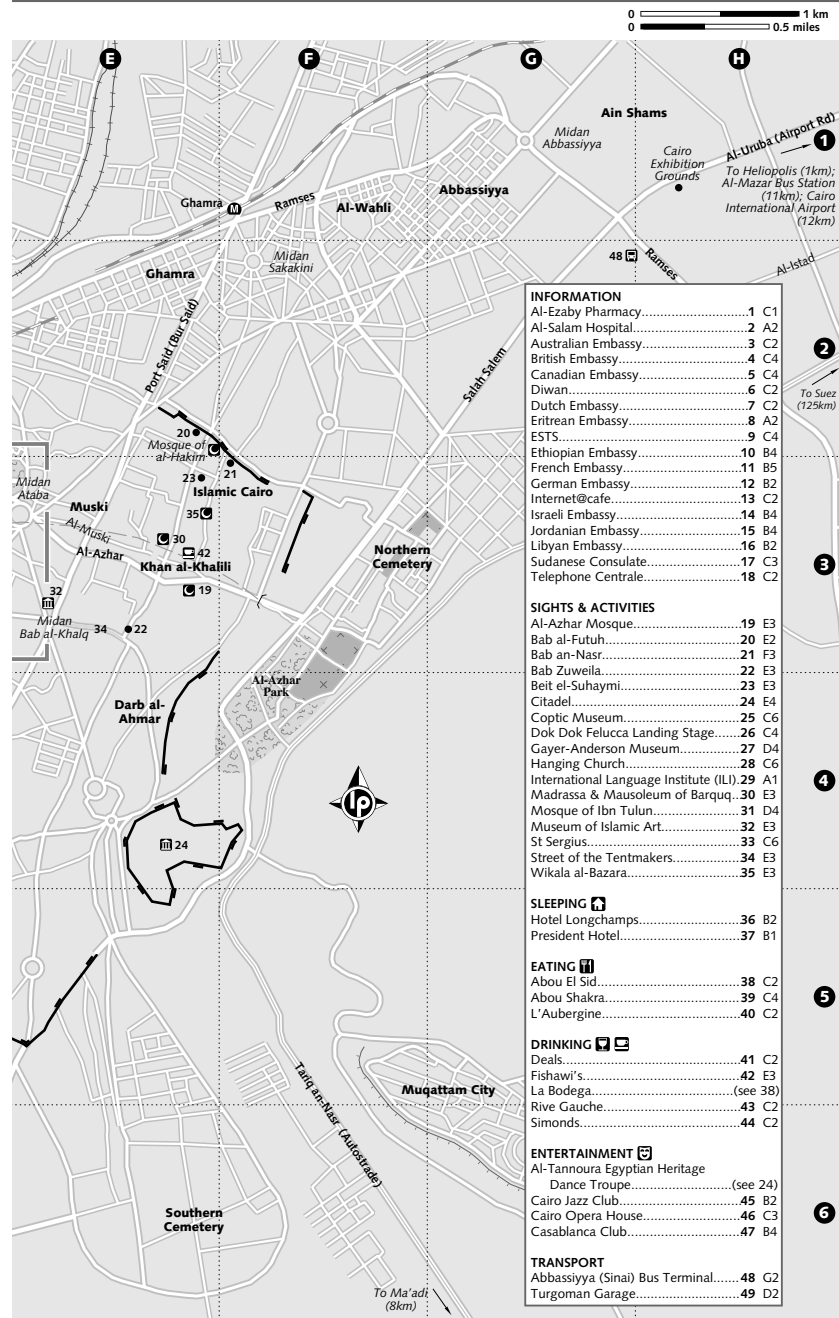
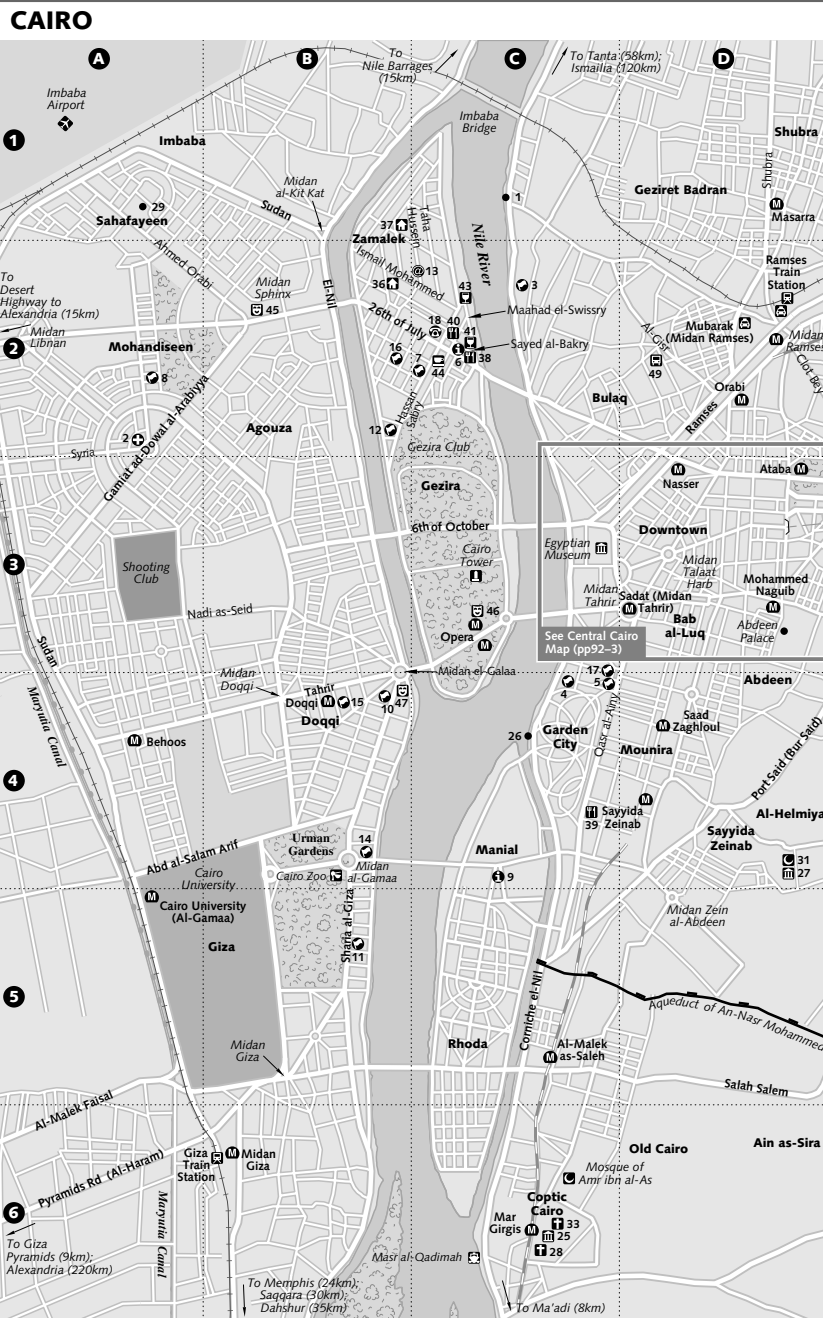
Internet Egypt (Map pp92-3; Nile Hilton Shopping Mall, Corniche el-Nil, Downtown; per hr E£10; ☎ 9am-midnight)

Internet@Cafe (Map pp88-9; 25 Sharia Ismail Mohamed, Zamalek; per hr E£5; ☎ 9am-1am)

Medical Services

Al-Ezaby Pharmacy Bulaq (Map pp88-9; Arcadia Mall, Corniche el-Nil; Heliopolis (☎ 414 8467; 1 Sharia Tayseer; ☎ 24hr)

Al-Salam Hospital (Map pp88-9; ☎ 524 0250, emergency 524 0077; Sharia Syria, Mohandiseen)



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EGYPT

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Money

There are banks, foreign exchange bureaux and ATMs all over town. Banque Misr exchange office at the Nile Hilton on the cornice is open 24 hours, as are the airport money-changing booths. All the big hotels have ATMs.

Amex (Map pp92-3; ☎ 574 7991; 15 Sharia Qasr el-Nil, Downtown; ☎ 9am-4.30pm)

Thomas Cook (Map pp92-3; ☎ 574 3955; 17 Sharia Mahmoud Bassiouni, Downtown; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Sat-Thu)

Post

Main post office (☎ 391 2615; Midan Ataba, Downtown; ☎ 8am-6pm Sat-Thu, to noon Fri & public holidays)

Telephone

In central Cairo, there are telephone centres located on Midan Tahrir and on Sharia Mohammed Mahmoud, Bab al-Luq, Sharia Adly. There's also one on Sharia 26th of July in Zamalek (Map pp88-9). All have card phones.

Tourist Information

Main tourist office (Map pp92-3; ☎ 391 3454; 5 Sharia Adly, Downtown; ☎ 8.30am-7pm) Staff are notoriously unhelpful.

Travel Agencies

The area around Midan Tahrir is teeming with travel agents. **Panorama Tours** (☎ 359 0200; www.eptours.com) is a reputable agency for air ticket reservations by phone, with English-speaking staff. They will mail tickets to your hotel.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The biggest source of irritation in Cairo is the bogus guide who uses remarkable ingenuity to steer you into 'no-hassle, government emporiums'. Scams include telling you they are off-duty guides from your hotel wanting to improve their English; insisting the museum is shut for a conference but they know a good place that's open; and offering cheap taxi services to places they have no permit to go. In some places, it can be difficult to walk more than a few metres without being accosted aggressively for such 'services'. The best advice is to plan where to go and how to get there before leaving the hotel.

Women travelling alone are vulnerable to unwanted attention in Cairo. Most hassle, however, tends to be verbal and can be avoided to some extent by dressing conservatively.

SIGHTS Egyptian Museum

A bewildering number of exhibits (over 100,000) are housed in the **Egyptian Museum** (Map pp92-3; ☎ 575 4319; Midan Tahrir, Downtown; adult/student E60/30; ☎ 9am-6.15pm). In addition, the museum is old, chaotic, label-less and lacklustre in its display of treasures.

Should you bother going? Without doubt, yes, but it helps to have a plan. To gain a purchase on the magnificence of the museum's collection, consider picking up a pictorial museum guide, such as *Masterpieces of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo*, from the bookshop outside, select a dozen pieces that interest and make a beeline for those. The museum is even more rewarding once you've seen the temples and tombs where the artefacts were found. This is particularly the case with the most famous exhibits of the museum, the magnificent golden treasures of Tutankhamen's Tomb.

Guides cost E£50 per hour and congregate outside the ticket booth. Access to the Royal Mummy Room costs an extra E£80/40, payable outside the room's 1st-floor entrance. You may find the spectacle of the unwrapped, exposed and belittled bodies, viewed in glass cases at close quarters, a rather intrusive experience – it's certainly one that would have appalled the kings who thought they could count on some dignity in perpetuity.

Islamic Cairo

Islamic Cairo is the medieval heart of the capital. For a comprehensive walking tour of its splendid sights, begin at Cairo's most historic institution, **Al-Azhar Mosque** (Map pp88-9; admission free; ☎ 24hr). One of Cairo's earliest mosques, Al-Azhar is also the world's oldest surviving university. The campus recently moved to Nasser City but the university grounds still function as an Islamic resource centre.

Opposite Al-Azhar Mosque is the great bazaar **Khan al-Khalili** (Map pp88-9) and *midan* (city square). Before you dip into its myriad alleyways, however, walk north up Sharia al-Gamaliyya, a once-important medieval thoroughfare and home to fine clusters of Mamluk-era mosques, *madrassas* (traditional Muslim school) and caravanserais. Visit **Wikala al-Bazara** (Map pp88-9; Sharia al-Tombakshiyia; adult/student E£10/5; ☎ 10am-5pm), a beautifully restored caravanserai and head for the old **northern wall**. The square-towered **Bab an-**

Nasr (Gate of Victory; Map pp88-9) and the rounded **Bab al-Futuh** (Gate of Conquests; Map pp88-9) were built in 1087. Returning to the bazaar via Sharia al-Muizz li-Din Allah, don't miss the spectacular **Beit el-Suhaymi** (Darb al-Asfar; Map pp88-9; adult/student E£20/10; ☎ 9am-5pm), a beautifully restored complex of three houses, tucked down an alley. This part of Islamic Cairo is home to the city's most historic prayer-schools, including the **Madrasa & Mausoleum of Barquq** (Map pp88-9; ☎ 6am-9pm), off Bein-al Qasreen.

Walk east from Al-Hussein, which is the name of both the *midan* and the mosque at the mouth of the bazaar, along Sharia al-Azhar, bear right at the top of the hill, and walk under the overpass to reach the **Northern Cemetery** (Map pp88-9). Commonly known as the 'City of the Dead', it is home to a sorry city of the living, too.

South of Khan al-Khalili, a busy market street runs past other exquisite *madrasa* complexes to the twin minarets of **Bab Zuweila** (Map pp88-9), the only surviving gate in the city's southern wall. Continuing south from Bab Zuweila, enter the **Street of the Tentmakers** (Map pp88-9), a covered bazaar specialising in appliqué work. Turn right to reach the celebrated **Museum of Islamic Art** (Map pp88-9; currently closed), or turn left for the Citadel (a long walk uphill that will take at least 40 to 50 minutes and will feel longer in summer).

Commenced by Saladin (Salah ad-Din) in the 12th century, the **Citadel** (☎ 512 1735; Midan al-Qala'a; adult/student E£50/25; ☎ 8am-5pm) houses an assortment of mosques and indifferently military museums. A visit is worthwhile, however, for the panoramic city view.

Don't miss the **Gayer-Anderson Museum** (Map pp88-9; Sharia Ibn Tulun; adult/student E£30/15; ☎ 8am-4pm), two 16th-century houses furnished by a British major between 1935 and 1942. Its labyrinthine rooms and passages include a secret room for women to observe the entertainments in the grand hall, and an eclectic set of antiques from around the world. It's just next to the imposing **Mosque of Ibn Tulun** (Beit al-Kritliyya; Map pp88-9; ☎ 364 7822; www.gawp.org; Sharia Ibn Tulun; admission E£6; ☎ 8am-6pm), 800m southwest of the Citadel.

Returning to the bazaar, shelter from the mayhem in one of Khan el-Khalili's many restaurants with their Moorish-style interiors or pay a visit to Fishawi's, the bazaar's most famous coffeehouse (see p96 for details).

Old Cairo

Once known as Babylon, the oldest part of Cairo was built by Coptic Christians and remains a Christian enclave to this day. The **Coptic Museum** (Map pp88-9; ☎ 363 9742; Sharia Mar Girgis; adult/student E£35/20; ☎ 9am-4pm), with mosaics, manuscripts and tapestries, and the **Hanging Church** (Kineeset al-Muallaqa; Map pp88-9; Sharia Mar Girgis; admission free; ☎ mass 8-11am Fri, 7-10am Sun), the centre of Coptic worship, are interesting to visit. Among other churches and monasteries here, **St Sergius** (Map pp88-9; admission free; ☎ 8am-4pm) apparently marks a resting place of the Holy Family during the flight from King Herod. The easiest way to reach here is by Metro (50pt), alighting at Mar Girgis station.

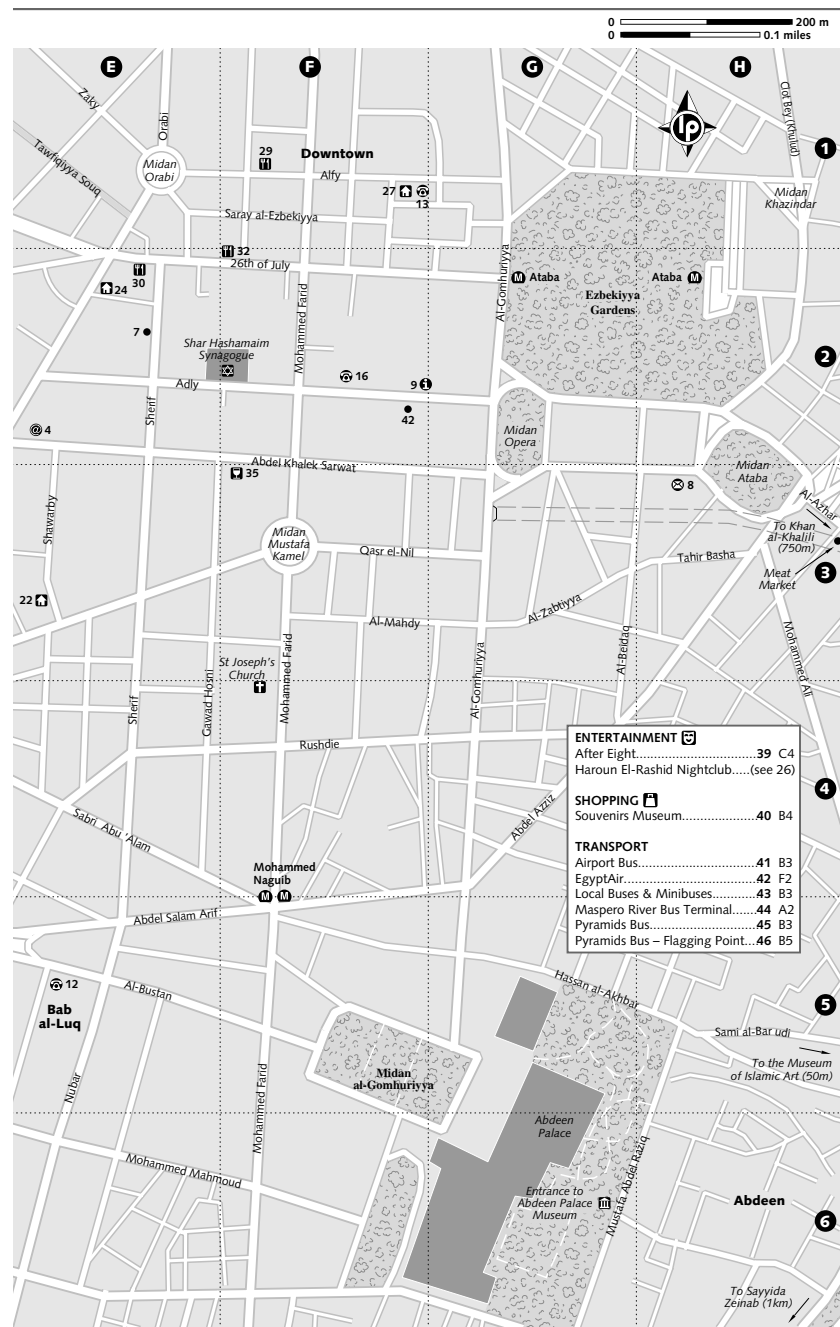
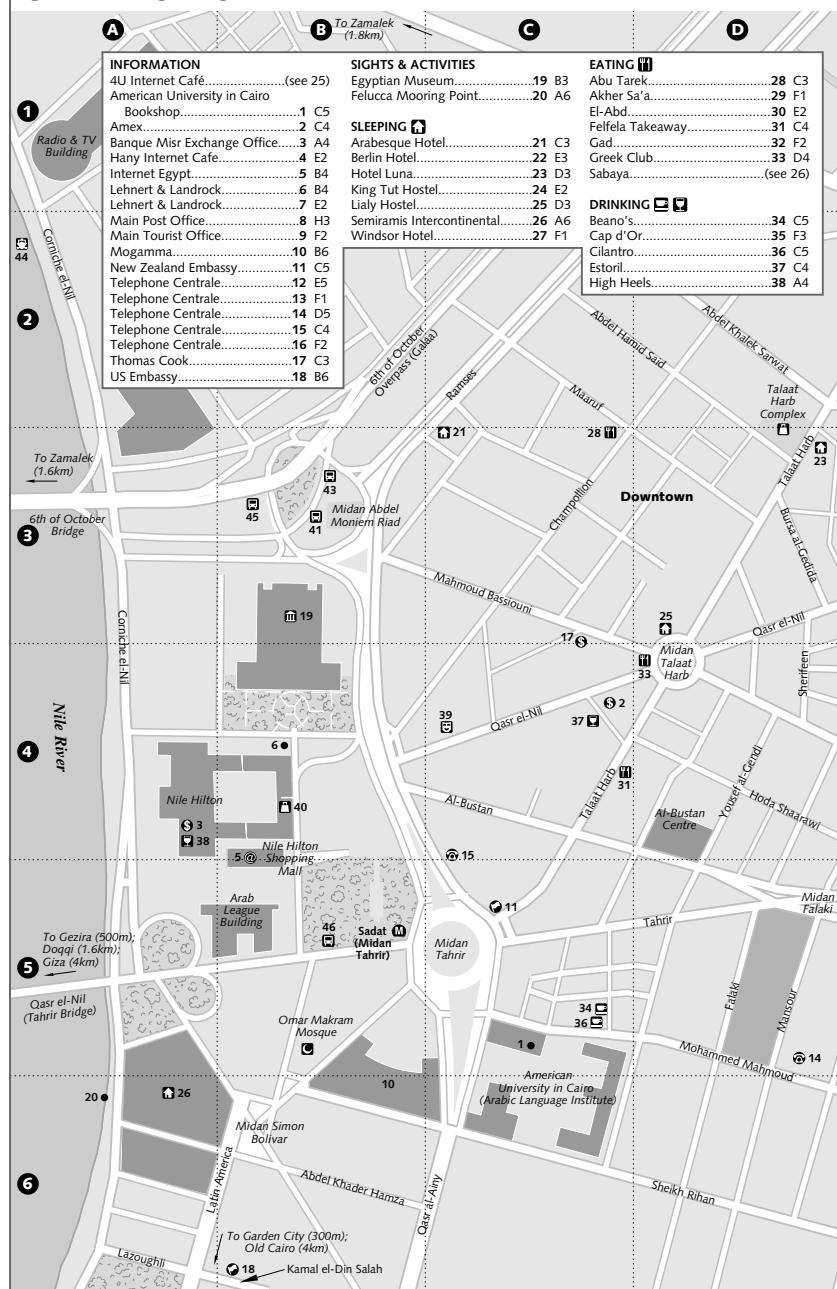
The Pyramids & Sphinx at Giza

Built on a desert plateau encroached upon by the modern city of Cairo, the pyramids here are the last remaining wonder of the ancient world. They were built as the mausoleums of Pharaohs to help their souls on the path to heaven. Representing more a celebration of life (and a desire for life to continue) than a preoccupation with death, they were constructed by thousands of artisans (not slaves as previously imagined) mindful of their part in the creation of something extraordinary.

Completed around 2600 BC, the **Great Pyramid of Khufu** (Cheops) is the oldest pyramid at Giza, and the largest (146.5m high). Although there isn't much to see inside, climbing the steep, narrow passage to the heart of the pyramid is an unforgettable, if intensely claustrophobic, experience. The neighbouring **Pyramid of Khafre** (Chephren) was built by Khufu's son. In deference to his father, he built a slightly smaller pyramid but located it on higher ground, giving the impression of greater size. Part of the original smooth limestone cladding, which once covered the entire structure, still remains. At a height of 62m, the **Pyramid of Menkaure** (Mycerinus) is the smallest of the three pyramids; it was built by Khafre's son, Menkaure, from blocks of granite floated along the Nile from Aswan.

Known in Arabic as Abu al-Hol (Father of Terror) and guarding the Pyramid of Khafre, the **Sphinx** is carved from a single piece of wind-eroded limestone. It has the face of a man – perhaps that of Khafre – and the body of a lion. It was buried by sand several times since it was built in 2500 BC, and Napoleon's army shot off its nose (now in the British

CENTRAL CAIRO



THE PYRAMIDS: IN & OUT OF FAVOUR

The pyramids of Giza are so iconic as to defy description. They have been puzzled over and plundered, visited and studied for 4000 years and yet their attraction continues unabated. Not that all spectators have been equally admiring of them. 'Just compare', wrote Frontinus, superintendent of Roman aqueducts, 'this vital aqueduct network [with] those useless pyramids.'

If the Romans were bemused by the apparent redundancy of the pyramids, 16th-century Islamic caliphs understood their spiritual power...and tried to tear them down. Napoleon two centuries later understood their political power...and used them for target practice. The renowned 19th-century traveller, Clarke, understood their aesthetic power, declaring that 'no-one ever approached them under other emotions than those of terror'...and then raced his friend to the top of Cheops.

The changing and dynamic relationship of spectator and pyramid over the centuries – the theories about why and wherefore, the speculations of divine intervention and apocalyptic foreboding – ensure that the pyramids fulfil their function of keeping alive the names of a father (Khufu), his son (Kahfre) and grandson (Menkaure). This is the real wonder of these remarkable mausoleums.

Museum) in the 19th century. Despite these 'mishaps', it remains one of the most evocative monuments of the ancient world.

The necropolis of Giza, which includes valley temples, causeways and satellite pyramids, is open from 7am to 7.30pm daily. There's a general admission fee of E£60/30 per adult/student, and extra charges to enter each of the three pyramids. Entry to the Great Pyramid costs E£150/75 per adult/student, payable in Egyptian pounds. Only 300 tickets are sold per day. These go on sale at 8am and 1pm at the ticket box in front of the pyramid and the queue forms early. Entry to the other two pyramids costs, respectively, E£30/15 and E£25/15 per adult/student, and tickets are obtained from the booth in front of each pyramid. Useful background information is available at www.guardians.net/hawass, an official antiquities website.

Horses, donkeys or camels are available for rides near the pyramids. Rates range from E£10 per hour for a donkey to E£30 for a carriage. Aggressive attempts for your custom can spoil the moment and baksheesh is expected for any animal photos, whether you want a camel in your composition or not.

Beside the Great Pyramid are five pits that once contained the Pharaoh's funerary barques. One of these wooden vessels was unearthed in 1954 and forms the centrepiece of the **Solar Barque Museum** (adult/student E£35/20; ☎ 9am-4pm).

The nightly **sound-and-light show** (☎ 386 3469; www.sound-light.egypt.com; adult/child E£60/30; ☎ 6.30pm, 7.30pm & 8.30pm) provides a magical introduction to the pyramids, despite the crowds. Three

performances in a variety of languages take place nightly below the sphinx. Check the website for the schedule.

Bus 355/357, marked 'CTA', runs from Heliopolis to the Pyramids via Midan Tahrir every 20 minutes. It costs E£2 and takes 45 minutes. For the return journey, buses and minibuses pick up from the junction of Pyramids Rd and the desert road to Alexandria, about 100m east of the Oberoi Mena House Hotel.

It costs about E£20 one way for a taxi if you bargain hard.

ACTIVITIES

A lovely way to enjoy sunset is to take a ride on a **felucca** (traditional Nile sailing vessel), which comes complete with captain and first mate. It costs about E£30 per hour per person, but bargain hard and expect to pay baksheesh. The captains wait by the mooring point (Map pp92-3) by the Semiramis Intercontinental on the corniche, or at the Dok Dok landing stage (Map pp88-9), just short of the bridge to Le Meridien Hotel.

COURSES

A 32-hour Arabic course is offered at the **International Language Institute** (ILI; ☎ 02-346 3087; www.arabicegypt.com; 4 Sharia Mahmoud Azmy, Sahafayeen, Cairo).

TOURS

Tours are easily arranged from any hotel. **Fathy el-Menesy** (☎ 259 3218, 012 278 1572; full-day Cairo excursion E£250) Privately owned taxi service with English-speaking driver.

Noga Tours (☎ 205 7908, 012 313 8446; www.first24hours.com) With excellent English-speaking guides, Egyptologists and drivers, this company offers full-day trips to Giza, Memphis and Saqqara for US\$22.50 plus entry fees.

SLEEPING Budget

Inexpensive accommodation is concentrated in Downtown, on the higher floors of office buildings on and around Sharia Talaat Harb. All tend to be hot in summer.

Lialy Hostel (Map pp92-3; ☎ 575 2802; www.lialyhostel.com; 3rd fl, 8 Midan Talaat Harb, Downtown; dm/s/d E£25/50/60, s/d with air-con E£70/80; ☎) One of the friendliest hostels in the city.

King Tut Hostel (Map pp92-3; ☎ 391 7897; king_tut_hostel@hotmail.com; 8th fl, 37 Sharia Talaat Harb, Downtown; s/d E£40/60, with air-con & TV E£45/80; ☎) This hostel has clean bathrooms and an attractive Oriental-style lounge.

Hotel Luna (Map pp92-3; ☎ 396 1020; www.hotel.lunacairo.com; 5th fl, 27 Sharia Talaat Harb, Downtown; s/d E£80/100, with shared bathroom E£60/80; ☎) One of the best budget hotels in Egypt, the Luna has large, clean rooms with spotless bathrooms.

Berlin Hotel (☎ 395 7502; berlinhotelcairo@hotmail.com; 4th fl, 2 Sharia Shawarby, Downtown; s/d E£77/97; ☎) The helpful management and private showers make this small establishment, just off Sharia Qasr el-Nil, worth the extra pounds.

Midrange

Windsor Hotel (Map pp92-3; ☎ 591 5277; www.windsorcairo.com; 19 Sharia Alf, Downtown; s/d US\$37/46; ☎) Formerly the British Officers' Club, the colonial lounge-bar is a highlight of this ageing but characterful establishment. The rooms are similarly grand but chafed around the edges.

Hotel Longchamps (Map pp88-9; ☎ 735 2311; www.hotelongchamps.com; 21 Sharia Ismail Mohammed, Zamalek; s/d from US\$42/56; ☎) This is probably the best midrange option in Cairo thanks to the enthusiastic owner.

Arabesque Hotel (Map pp92-3; ☎ 579 9679; arabesque_hotel@yahoo.com; 11 Sharia Ramses, Downtown; s/d with air-con E£100/150, without bathroom E£60/80; ☎) A comfortable, clean choice, the lounge here has great views over the Nile. Avoid rooms facing the motorway.

President Hotel (Map pp88-9; ☎ 735 0718; preshotl@thewayout.net; 22 Sharia Taha Hussein, Zamalek; s/d US\$70/55; ☎) The rooms in this efficient hotel are comfortable and attractive, and the in-house patisserie, Le Bec Sucre, is one of the best in the city.

Top End

Semiramis Intercontinental (Map pp92-3; ☎ 795 7171; www.intercontinental.com; Corniche el-Nil, Downtown; r from US\$170; ☎) Built on the banks of the Nile, this newly rebuilt, top-class hotel has a long history in Cairo and deserves its reputation. Try a club-floor room for US\$200, which includes fantastic Nile views; complimentary breakfast, light supper (6pm to 9pm) and drinks are offered in a private penthouse lounge as part of the room rate.

EATING

Most restaurants are centred around Midan Talaat Harb but for more interesting venues, try the Zamalek neighbourhood. Cairenes are very discerning when it comes to food, so opt for the busy venues if you want to avoid 'Pharaohs' Revenge'. Women on their own should feel reasonably comfortable in Cairo eating and drinking venues, except in traditional *ahwas* (coffeehouses).

Budget

Felfela takeaway (Map pp92-3; Sharia Talaat Harb, Downtown; meals E£1-3; ☎ 8am-midnight) This place sells excellent *fuul* and *ta'amiyya* sandwiches.

El-Abd (Map pp92-3; Sharia 26th of July, Downtown; ☎ 8am-midnight) Try the phenomenally popular El-Abd for the best Oriental pastries in town (takeaway only).

Akher Sa'a (Map pp92-3; 8 Sharia Alf, Downtown; meals E£3-4; ☎ 24hr) This is a frantically busy *fuul* and *ta'amiyya* takeaway with a no-frills cafeteria next door.

Gad (Map pp92-3; ☎ 576 3583; 13 Sharia 26th of July, Downtown; meals E£3-4; ☎ 7am-1am; ☎) This Western-style fast-food outlet offers freshly cooked, good-value fare, popular with young Cairenes.

Abu Tarek (Map pp92-3; 40 Sharia Champollion, Downtown; small/large E£3/4; ☎ 24hr) The place to try *kushari* (mixture of noodles, rice and lentils).

Midrange & Top End

Greek Club (Map pp92-3; ☎ 577 4999; 3 Sharia Qasr el-Nil, Downtown; mains E£9-16; ☎ 7am-2am) There's no menu at this Cairene institution with its neo-classical interior – just a well-informed waiter and delicious Levantine fare.

Abou Shakra (Map pp88-9; ☎ 531 6111; 69 Sharia Qasr al-Aini, Garden City; mains E£15-40; ☎ 9am-2am) Open since 1947, Abou Shakra serves the city's best *kofta* (mincemeat and spices grilled on a skewer).

L'Aubergine (Map pp88-9; ☎ 738 0080; 5 Sharia Sayed al-Bakry, Zamalek; mains ££16-30; ☎ noon-2am; ♿) This atmospheric bistro's menu includes tasty vegetarian dishes. The upstairs bar often features a DJ.

Abou El Sid (Map pp88-9; ☎ 735 9640; 157 Sharia 26th of July, Zamalek; mains ££20-50; ☎ noon-2am; ♿) With brass lamps and plump cushions, Abou El Sid's Oriental flight of fancy is a fitting place to try traditional Egyptian food.

The city's best restaurants are found in five-star hotels. **Sabaya** (Map pp92-3; ☎ 795 7171; Corniche el-Nil, Downtown; mains ££40-60; ♿) is a world-class Lebanese restaurant in the Semiramis Intercontinental.

DRINKING

Two café chains, Cilantro and Beano's, have branches across Cairo and serve Italian-style coffee.

Simonds (Map pp88-9; ☎ 735 9436; 112 Sharia 26th of July, Zamalek) At this famous place the barista has been frothing cappuccino (££5) for over half a century, and the croissants (££2.50) are simply Parisienne.

Fishawi's (Map pp88-9; Khan al-Khalili; tea ££3, sheesha ££4.50; ☎ 24hr) A traditional *ahwa*, this ranks as Cairo's elder statesman and a must on any Cairo itinerary. It's a few steps off Midan Hussein.

The best Downtown bars are **Estoril** (Map pp92-3; ☎ 574 3102; 12 Sharia Talaat Harb; ♿), the **Cap d'Or** (Map pp92-3; Sharia Abdel Khalek Sarwat), and **High Heels** (Map pp92-3; ☎ 578 0444; Nile Hilton, Corniche el-Nil).

In Zamalek, expats prop up the bar at the stylish **La Bodega** (☎ 736 6761; 157 Sharia 26th of July; ☎ noon-2am). For something less sedate, try the rowdy **Deals** (Map pp92-3; ☎ 736 0502; 2 Sharia Sayed al-Bakry; ☎ 6pm-2am), off Sharia 26th of July, or **Rive Gauche** (Map pp88-9; ☎ 012 210 0129; Sharia Maahad el-Swissry).

ENTERTAINMENT

For full entertainment listings, pick up a copy of the weekly *Cairo Times* (££10).

Al-Tannoura Egyptian Heritage Dance Troupe (Map pp88-9; ☎ 512 1735; admission free; ☎ performances 7pm Mon, Wed & Sat) There are regular displays of mesmerising Sufi dancing by this troupe at the El-Gawhara Theatre in the Citadel. A queue forms at the exit gate of the Citadel at least one hour before the performance.

The best belly dancers perform at Cairo's five-star hotels. Current favourites include

Haroun El-Rashid Nightclub (Map pp92-3; ☎ 795 7171, ext 8011; Corniche el-Nil, Downtown; ☎ 11pm-3.30am Tue-Sun) at the Semiramis Intercontinental and the Cairo Sheraton's **Casablanca Club** (Alhambra; Map pp88-9; ☎ 336 9700; Midan al-Galaa, Doqqi; ☎ 7pm-4am Tue-Sun). Performances generally begin late (around 1am).

For live music gigs try the **Cairo Jazz Club** (Map pp88-9; ☎ 345 9939; 197 Sharia 26th of July, Agouza) or **After Eight** (Map pp92-3; ☎ 574 0855; 6 Sharia Qasr el-Nil, Downtown; minimum charge Fri-Wed ££60, Thu ££90; ☎ noon-2am). Performances by international classical and jazz musicians are regularly hosted at the **Cairo Opera House** (Map pp88-9; ☎ 739 8132/44; www.operahouse.gov.eg; Gezira Exhibition Grounds).

SHOPPING

Brass plates, boxes inlaid with mother-of-pearl, leather slippers, and items made of granite, turquoise and tiger's-eye (priced by the gram) are just some of the many crafts you will find in the labyrinthine passages of Khan al-Khalili (p90). Hand-knotted silk carpets are made in the area between Giza and Saqqara and most carpet schools have a showroom on site. Giza is the area for hand-painted papyrus scrolls and shops selling Egyptian cotton goods.

Many shops in Giza and Cairo can arrange for gold or silver cartouches bearing your name in hieroglyphic characters.

For a thankfully hassle-free shopping experience, good-quality items and friendly management, try **Souvenirs Museum** (Map pp92-3; ☎ 578 0444 ext 661; Nile Hilton, Corniche el-Nil, Downtown), 30m from the Egyptian Museum.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air
EgyptAir (Map pp92-3; ☎ 392 7649; 6 Sharia Adly, Downtown) has a number of offices around town.

Cairo International Airport (☎ Terminal 1 265 5000, Terminal 2 265 2222) is 20km northeast of Cairo. Terminal 1 services EgyptAir's international and domestic flights and Terminal 2 all international airlines except Saudi Arabian Airlines. You'll find ATMs and exchange booths in the arrivals halls.

Bus 356 is air-conditioned, and runs at 20-minute intervals from 7am to midnight between both terminals and Midan Abdel Moniem Riad (Map pp92-3), behind the Egyptian Museum in central Cairo (££2, plus ££1 per large luggage item, one hour).

A black-and-white taxi to central Cairo costs around ££45 to ££60. To the airport it costs ££30 to ££35.

Bus

Cairo's main bus station is **Turgoman Garage** (Sharia al-Gisir, Bulaq), 1km northwest of the intersection of Sharias Galaa and 26th of July. A taxi to the bus station costs ££5 from Downtown. Buses depart from here to all parts of the country.

Destination	Price (££)	Duration	Frequency
Alexandria	16	2½hr	hourly
Aswan	85	13hr	1 daily
Bahariyya	20	5hr	2 daily
Dahab	75	9hr	4 daily
Dakhla	50	11hr	4 daily
Farafr	40	8hr	2 daily
Hurghada	60	6½hr	9 daily
Kharga	50	10hr	2 daily
Luxor	85	11hr	1 daily
Port Said	16	3hr	hourly
St Katherine's Monastery	37	7½hr	1 daily
Sharm el-Sheikh	68	7hr	11 daily

There are two other bus stations: Al-Mazar, near the airport, for international services, and **Abbassiyya (Sinai) Bus Terminal** (Map pp88-9; Sharia Ramses, Abbassiyya), where Sinai services arrive (confusingly, these leave from Turgoman).

For details of international bus services from Cairo, see p124.

Service Taxi

Most service taxis depart from stands around Ramses train station and Midan Ulali. Services include Alexandria (££12, three hours), Ismailia (££8, 1½ hours), Port Said (££14, two hours) and Suez (££7.50, one hour).

Train

Characterful and colonial, **Ramses train station** (Mahatta Ramses; Map pp88-9; ☎ 575 3555; Midan Ramses, Downtown) is Cairo's main terminus. It has a left-luggage office charging ££2.50 per piece per day and a **tourist information office** (☎ 9am-7pm).

The train is particularly recommended for the journey to Luxor, which, with its Nile views, is something of a classic.

The **Abela Egypt Sleeping Train** (☎ 574 9274; www.sleepingtrains.com) leaves at 8pm, arriving

in Luxor at 5.05am the next morning, and Aswan at 8.15am. To Luxor costs US\$53/74 per person one way in a double/single cabin. Tickets must be paid for in US dollars or euros (cash only). The price includes dinner and breakfast and the experience is enjoyably old-fashioned.

Aside from the sleeping train, foreigners can only travel to Luxor and Aswan on train 980, departing Cairo daily at 7am; train 996, departing at 10pm; and train 1902, departing at 12.30am. First- and 2nd-class fares to Luxor (10 hours) and Aswan (13 hours) are ££67/45 and ££81/47 respectively.

You must buy tickets at least a couple of days in advance.

GETTING AROUND

Bus & Minibus

Cairo's main local bus and minibus stations, serving all parts of the city, are at Midan Abdel Moniem Riad (Map pp92-3).

Metro

The Metro system is startlingly efficient, and the stations are surprisingly clean. A short-hop ticket (up to nine stations) costs 50pt. The first carriage is reserved for women only.

River Bus

On the cornice in front of the Radio & TV Building you'll find the Maspero river bus terminal (Map pp92-3). From here boats depart every 15 minutes between 7am and 10pm for Doqqi, Manial, Giza and Misr al-Qadima (Old Cairo). The trip takes 50 minutes and the fare is 50pt.

Taxi

The easiest way of getting around is by taxi. The following table is a rough guide to taxi fares from Downtown Cairo but expect to bargain hard.

Destination	Fare (££)
Abbassiyya (Sinai) Bus Terminal	15
Airport	30-35
Citadel	5
Heliopolis	10-15
Khan al-Khalili	5
Midan Ramses	3
Pyramids	20
Turgoman Garage	5
Zamalek	5

AROUND CAIRO

MEMPHIS, SAQQARA & DAHSHUR

The former Pharaonic capital of Memphis, 24km south of Cairo, is worth visiting for its **museum** (adult/student £25/15; ☎ 8am-4pm), which houses an impressive statue of Ramses II.

Nearby **Saqqara** (adult/student £50/25; ☎ 8am-4pm) you'll find a massive necropolis strewn with pyramids, temples and tombs where once Pharaohs, generals and sacred animals were interred. The star attraction is the **Step Pyramid of Zoser**, the world's oldest stone monument. Nearby are the **Mastaba of Ti** and the **Pyramid of Teti**.

Ten kilometres south of Saqqara is **Dahshur** (adult/student £20/10; ☎ 8am-4pm), a 3.5km-long field of pyramids, including the **Bent Pyramid** (unfortunately closed) and the mystical **Red Pyramid**.

The best way to visit Memphis, Saqqara and Dahshur is by taxi (£140). Stipulate the sights you want to see, the length of the trip (five hours is about right) and bargain hard. Otherwise, organise a tour (p94).

SINAI

Occupied by Israel from 1967 to 1982, and sharing more with Asia than Africa, Sinai is the most atypical part of Egypt.

Settled by Bronze Age communities, attracted by Sinai's copper and turquoise deposits, and later by Pharaonic mining parties, Sinai is most celebrated in history for the Exodus of Israelites towards the Promised Land. Though disputed by historians, Jews, Christians and Muslims believe Gebel Mousa (Mt Sinai) marks the spot where Moses received the Ten Commandments. It remains an important pilgrimage site.

If the interior belongs to God, Sinai's coast belongs to mammon. Vast resorts fringe the peninsula, attracting biblical numbers of sun-worshippers, attracted by blue skies and world-class diving.

Despite high tourist revenue, the indigenous Bedouin of the Sinai see little investment in their own communities. In recent years their resentment, encouraged by fundamentalists with their own agenda, has led to violence. Tourism continues unabated, however.

TABA

☎ 069

On the Egypt-Israel border, Taba was once a busy hub on the caravan route to Aqaba. It continues as a place of strategic importance: taken during Israeli occupation, it was only returned to Egypt in 1989.

Luxury tourist resorts line the beautiful turquoise coast, particularly at Taba Heights, 17km south of town. Nearby Pharaoh's Island, with its spectacular Byzantine fortress, was occupied by Crusaders in 1116 and conquered by Saladin.

The border between Egypt and Israel is open 24 hours. There's a post and telephone office, and some shops in 'town'. You can change money at the 24-hour Banque Misr booth in the arrivals hall, and there's an ATM nearby. The Taba Hilton can change travellers cheques.

NUWEIBA

☎ 069

Once an important point on the caravan route to Mecca, and protected by the 16th-century Sultan El-Ghuri fortress, Nuweiba is still a busy port. The surrounding coast is now a resort catering for all budgets and offering opportunities for desert and diving safaris.

Nuweiba comprises the port, Nuweiba City and Tarabin, a beach area popular with backpackers.

The **Almostakbal Internet Café** (☎ 350 0090; per hr £6; ☎ 10am-midnight) is in Nuweiba City. Next to the bus station, there are post and telephone offices. Nearby Banque du Caire and National Bank of Egypt have ATMs and change travellers cheques.

Well-respected diving centres include **Diving Camp Nuweiba** (☎ 012 249 6002; www.scuba-college.com), in Nuweiba Village Hotel, and **Emperor Divers** (☎ 352 0321; www.emperordivers.com), in Nuweiba Coral Hilton Resort.

Approach the Bedouin of Tarabin for jeep tours or all-inclusive camel treks (per day £150) to the **Coloured Canyon**, **Khudra Oasis**, **Ain Umm Ahmed** and **Ain al-Furtaga**.

In front of a good reef, **Fayrouza Village** (☎ 350 1133; fayrouza@sinaif4you.com; s/d US\$10/14) offers simple but spotless huts. An enthusiastic owner makes **Soft Beach Camp** (☎ 364 7586; info@softbeachcamp.com; s/d £15/20; ☎) the best in Sinai. Breakfast costs £15 extra. Comfortable four-star **Nuweiba Village** (☎ 350 0401; www.nuweibaresort.com; s/d huts US\$15/20, r from US\$40/50;

THE SOUTHBOUND CARAVAN FROM TABA

After crossing into Egypt, head south towards Nuweiba. From there, you can cut inland to climb Mt Sinai or aim for one of Sinai's legendary beach resorts.

After exiting the arrivals hall, the bus station is a 10-minute walk straight ahead on the left. A 7am service goes to St Katherine's Monastery (£26, four hours) via Nuweiba (£11, one hour) and Dahab (£21, 2½ hours). Other services include Sharm el-Sheikh (£26, 3½ hours) at 9am and 3pm, and Cairo (£55 to £60, seven hours) at 10.30am, 12.30pm and 4.30pm.

Service taxis to Nuweiba charge £50 per person, £70 to Dahab and £120 to Sharm el-Sheikh.

☎ ☎), in Nuweiba City, features a private beach. **Habiba Village** (☎ 350 0770; www.sinaif4you.com/habiba; s/d US\$22.50/55; ☎) is an attractive and well-run beachside hotel in Nuweiba City. Serving tasty mezze (£5 to £20), **Dr Sheesh Kebab** (☎ 350 0273; ☎ 7am-11pm) and **Cleopatra Restaurant** (☎ 350 0503; ☎ 8am-midnight) are both recommended.

There are ferry services to Cairo (£60, nine hours, three daily), Sharm el-Sheikh (£21, 2½ hours), Dahab (£11, one hour), Taba (£11, one hour) and St Katherine's (£21, three hours).

For information about ferries to Aqaba in Jordan, see p124.

The service taxi station is by the port. Per person fares average £60 to Cairo, £30 to Sharm el-Sheikh and £15 to Dahab.

ST KATHERINE'S MONASTERY

☎ 069

A place of pilgrimage for Christians since the Middle Ages, St Katherine's Monastery, at the foot of Mt Sinai, was built in the 6th century by Emperor Justinian. In residence are 22 Greek Orthodox monks whose order was founded in the 4th century AD by the Byzantine empress Helena. She built the monastery chapel beside the **burning bush** (still thriving) from which God allegedly spoke to Moses.

The chapel is dedicated to St Katherine, the 4th-century martyr of Alexandria who was tortured on a spiked wheel. Her body, according to legend, appeared on top of the highest mountain in Egypt, near Mt Sinai, which was renamed Gebel Katrin in her honour.

There's no charge to visit the **monastery** (☎ 9am-noon Mon-Thu & Sat, except religious holidays), but a donation is requested to see the dazzling icons in the **Sacred Sacristy** (adult/student £25/10).

Home to gazelles, stone martens and ibex, **St Katherine Protectorate** (US\$3) is a 4350-sq-km

national park that encompasses Mt Sinai and the monastery. Local Bedouin camps offer all-inclusive camel safaris here from £150 per day. Mt Sinai is an easy and worthwhile climb, offering spectacular views of the arid Sinai landscape. The crowds, however, can be overwhelming.

In the village of Al-Milga, about 3.5km from the monastery, there's a post office, telephone centrale, bank, shops and cafés. The **Banque Misr** (☎ 10am-1pm & 5-8pm Sat-Thu) changes cash and gives Visa and MasterCard advances. There's no ATM and no internet café.

The friendly **El-Malga Bedouin Camp** (☎ 347 0042; sheikmoussa@yahoo.com; tent per person £10, dm £10-15, r with 2 beds £30; ☎), a 10-minute walk from the bus station, offers mattresses on straw floors in stone buildings. Internet and kitchen use is free. For those wishing to savour the sanctity of the monastery once the tour parties have departed, **Monastery Guest-house** (☎ 347 0353; fax 347 0543; s/d half board US\$55/70) offers plain but adequate rooms. A restaurant serves beer and wine. Nonguests can leave baggage here (£5) while hiking Mt Sinai. In Al-Milga there's a couple of small restaurants, a bakery opposite the mosque, and two supermarkets.

All buses leave from behind the mosque in Al-Milga. A daily bus at 6am travels to Cairo (£37, seven hours). To Dahab (£16, two hours) and Nuweiba (£21, three hours), there's one bus at 1pm.

DAHAB

☎ 069

The bombs that struck Dahab in April 2006 took away the innocence of this favourite backpacker retreat. Although town and tourist have made valiant attempts to pretend nothing happened, a shadow still hangs over the beachside cafés. That said, Dahab (literally 'Gold'), with its friendly shops and restaurants,

has gained a sense of grateful solidarity with its visitors that is particularly appealing after the impersonal experience of neighbouring resorts. It remains an unpretentious place to dive and its windswept beaches are ideal for windsurfing.

There are two parts to Dahab: Dahab City has five-star hotels and the bus station; As-salah, once a Bedouin village, is about 2.5km north and is divided into two sections, Masbat and Mashraba.

Information

Internet access is available at **Download.Net** (per hr E£5; ☎ 24hr), next to the Nesima Resort, and **Felopater Internet** (per hr E£5; ☎ 10am-midnight), both in Mashraba.

The **National Bank of Egypt** (☎ 9am-10pm), on the corniche in Masbat, has an ATM and changes cash and travellers cheques. The post office and **telephone centrale** (☎ 24hr) are in Dahab City.

Activities

Many dive clubs offer camel/dive safaris. The following are recommended:

Fantasea Dive Centre (☎ 364 0483; www.fantasea-diving.net; Masbat)

Inmo (☎ 364 0370; www.inmodivers.de; Inmo Divers Home, Mashraba)

Nesima Dive Centre (☎ 364 0320; www.nesima-resort.com; Nesima Resort, Mashraba)

In the morning, the Bedouin congregate along the waterfront offering camel trips to the interior. A three-day trip, including food, costs between E£600 and E£900.

Sleeping

Seven Heaven (☎ 364 0080; www.7heavenhotel.com; Masbat; huts E£10, r E£60; ☎ ☎) A bustling camp on the corniche, set back from the beach, Seven Heaven is popular with backpackers. Breakfast costs E£10 extra.

Inmo Divers Home (☎ 364 0370; www.inmodivers.de; Mashraba; s/d US\$37/46; ☎ ☎) Book ahead for this excellent midrange hotel, popular with divers.

Hilton Dahab Resort (☎ 364 0310; www.hilton.com/worldwideresorts; Dahab City; s/d/ste from US\$65/90/97; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) This tranquil resort has impressive leisure facilities including a sandy beach ideal for windsurfing (\$41 for two hours).

Blue Beach Club (☎ 364 0411; www.bluebeachclub.com; Mashraba; s/d E£240/300; ☎ ☎) With attractive rooms, Blue Beach features include Arabic classes and Dahab's most popular bar, the Furry Cup.

Eating & Drinking

Lakhbatita (☎ 364 1306; Mashraba; mains E£15-60) Dahab's best restaurant features *mashrabiyya* (wooden lattice screens), red cushions, shelves of home-bottled preserves, and a combination of Asian and Arabic cuisine with salad and appetian thrown in for good measure.

Carm Inn (☎ 364 1300; Masbat; dishes E£25-65; ☎ noon-midnight) Vegetarians are well catered for here with a menu designed for 'vitality, building a strong body, muscular development and fun'.

Jasmine Restaurant (☎ 364 0852; Mashraba; mains E£35; ☎ 7am-1am) Perched on the water's edge, this restaurant is a hit with locals and travellers. With an eclectic menu, the restaurant

offers international dishes, such as satay with peanut sauce and brownies with ice-cream.

Furry Cup (Blue Beach Club, Mashraba; ☎ noon-2am) Divers decompress every evening at happy hour (6pm to 8pm) at Furry Cup (Stella E£6, spirits E£15). It serves bangers and mash.

Other popular venues include Tota and Crazy House (Stella E£10 at both), on the Masbat corniche.

Entertainment

Full moon parties (☎ 012 370 7774; admission E£100; ☎ 6pm-6am) Gold Soul Productions organises these parties at a canyon outside town. They feature overseas DJs and live music. The price covers music and transfer from town.

Getting There & Around

The **bus station** (☎ 7.30am-11pm) is located in Dahab City. There are services to Sharm el-Sheikh (E£16, one hour, 10 daily), Nuweiba (E£11, one hour, four daily), Taba (E£22, 2½ hours), St Katherine's Monastery (E£16, 1½ hours), Cairo (E£62 to E£75, 10 hours, four daily), Hurghada (E£90, 2½ hours) and Luxor (E£110, 7½ to eight hours).

A service taxi between Assalah and Dahab City costs E£5.

SHARM EL-SHEIKH & NA'AMA BAY

☎ 069

Sharm el-Sheikh and neighbouring Na'ama Bay cater more for package groups than independent travellers. Built around two principal bays, both famous for snorkelling and diving, the area has plenty of facilities and entertainment, top-class hotels and shopping malls. Budget accommodation is available in Shark's Bay, around 12km northeast of Na'ama Bay.

Information

The many internet outlets include **Sharm Phone Net Café** (☎ 366 4725; per hr E£7; ☎ 24hr), in the mall opposite Sharm's Old Market. There are numerous ATMs in Na'ama Bay and most major banks have branches in Sharm. The **post office** (☎ 8am-3pm Sat-Thu) is on the hill in Sharm and there's a **telephone centrale** (☎ 24hr) nearby.

Activities

Diving is the area's star attraction. The following clubs in Na'ama Bay are recommended: **Oonas Dive Centre** (☎ 360 0581; www.oonasdivers.com) **Red Sea Diving College** (☎ 360 0145; www.redsea-college.com)

Sinai Divers (☎ 360 0697; www.sinaidivers.com) **Subex** (☎ 360 0122; www.subex.org)

If all that rubber doesn't appeal, many outlets in town offer hour-long glass-bottom boat trips (E£80).

Sleeping

Shark's Bay Umbi Diving & Camp (☎ 360 0942; www.sharksbay.com; s/d huts without bathroom US\$15/19, cabins with air-con US\$25/37; ☎ ☎) With clean cliff-top huts and beachside cabins, this is the only laid-back camp in the area.

Youth Hostel (☎ /fax 366 0317; City Council St, Hadaba; per person member/nonmember E£25/56; ☎ ☎) This youth hostel is just about the cheapest place to stay in town.

Pigeon's House (☎ 360 0996; pigeon@access.com.eg; Sharm-Na'ama Bay Rd, Na'ama Bay; s/d E£120/170, without bathroom E£75/95; ☎ ☎) One of few budget hotels in Na'ama Bay, rooms at Pigeon's House feature nylon sheets, utilitarian décor and hard beds.

Camel Hotel (☎ 360 0700; www.cameldive.com; King of Bahrain St, Na'ama Bay; s/d from US\$103/126; ☎ ☎ ☎) This small four-star hotel located in the mall at Na'ama Bay is efficiently run. Breakfast is extra.

Intercontinental Garden Resort (☎ 360 0006; www.sharmelshikh.intercontinental.com; Garden Reef Bay, Sharm el-Sheikh; s/d from US\$120/140; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) With wonderful snorkelling straight from its beach, this stylish hotel offers a delightful retreat from the concrete metropolis of neighbouring Sharm.

Eating

Safsafa Restaurant (☎ 366 0474; Sharm el-Sheikh; meals E£10-45) Popular with locals, this is the most attractive restaurant in the Old Market. Safsafa serves fresh seafood from the Red Sea and the seafood pasta dishes are particularly tasty (E£30).

Tam Tam Oriental Café (☎ 360 0150; Na'ama Bay; mezze E£12, sandwiches E£8-14, mains E£29-66) Located on the beach strip near the main mall, the popular Tam Tam features a range of Egyptian fare.

Sinai Star (☎ 366 0323; Sharm el-Sheikh; set meals around E£20) In the Old Market, this serves the best seafood in Sharm.

Tandoori Indian Restaurant (☎ 360 0700; King of Bahrain St, Na'ama Bay; mains E£24-110, set menus E£145-185; ☎ 6.30-11.30pm) Part of Camel Hotel, this is Sharm's best Indian restaurant.

CLIMBING MOUNT SINAI

There are two routes to the top of Mt Sinai, both of which meet at a plateau known as Elijah's Basin, 300m below the summit.

One trail takes about two hours to ascend and can be negotiated by camel, hired from near St Katherine's Monastery from E£50.

The other trail comprises the 3750 Steps of Repentance, laid by a monk as a form of penance. The steps – 3000 to Elijah's Basin – are ferociously steep and uneven.

From Elijah's Basin, there are a further 750 steps to reach the 2285m summit. The extra half-hour effort is worthwhile as the views are spectacular, particularly in the blood-red of late afternoon. Most people, however, prefer to make the climb at night to enjoy sunrise, returning by 9am to visit the monastery – a good option in summer when daytime temperatures can make for a gruelling hike.

In winter, when it's bitterly cold and windy, bring food and water, warm clothes and a sleeping bag for resting at Elijah's Basin. Huts along the route provide hikers with blankets (E£5) and hot tea. They also sell Bedouin beadwork purses (E£20 to E£50) that make a fun souvenir of the hike.

La Rustichella (☎ 360 1154; Na'ama Bay; meals E£35-60; 🍴) This large, friendly trattoria, with a hearty Italian menu, has an outdoor terrace, often with live jazz.

Drinking & Entertainment

Popular venues include the ubiquitous **Hard Rock Café** (☎ 360 2664; www.hardrock.com), in the mall at Na'ama Bay; the pricey but glamorous **Little Buddha** (☎ 360 1030; Na'ama Bay; 🍷 1pm-3am), and the **Pirates' Bar** (☎ 360 0137; Hilton Fayrouz Village, Na'ama Bay), with a popular happy hour from 5.30pm to 7.30pm.

Getting There & Around

Sharm el-Sheikh International Airport (☎ 360 1140) is about 10km north of Na'ama Bay. **EgyptAir** (☎ 366 1056; Sharm el-Sheikh; 🕒 9am-9pm) has four daily flights from Sharm to Cairo (E£733, one hour) and two flights per week to Luxor (E£530, 50 minutes). Microbuses charge E£2 between the airport and Na'ama Bay or Sharm el-Sheikh; taxis charge E£20/40.

A luxury high-speed ferry operated by **International Fast Ferries Co** (www.internationalfastferries.com; one way adult E£250 or US\$40) runs between Sharm el-Sheikh and Hurghada (1½ hr) four times a week. Tickets can be bought from travel agencies or the port ferry office, two hours before departure. Taxis to Na'ama Bay cost E£25 from outside the port compound. Inside the compound, they cost double.

The bus station is between Na'ama Bay and Sharm el-Sheikh. There are frequent services to Cairo (E£68, six hours). Other services include Alexandria (E£88, nine hours, two daily), Dahab (E£11, one hour, six daily), Nuweiba (E£21.50, 2½ hours), Taba (E£26.50, four hours), St Katherine's Monastery (E£28, 3½ hours) and Luxor (E£95, 14 hours).

Microbuses travel regularly between Sharm el-Sheikh and Na'ama Bay for E£1. A taxi costs E£15.

RAS MOHAMMED

Declared a **national park** (admission US\$5) in 1988, the headland of Ras Mohammed is 30km west of Sharm el-Sheikh, at the southern tip of the peninsula. Home to some of the world's most spectacular coral reefs, the park is teeming with most of the Red Sea's 1000 species of fish. You can dive here; most clubs in Na'ama Bay and Sharm offer trips. You need a full Egyptian visa to visit Ras Mohammed.

SUEZ CANAL

The Suez Canal severs Africa from Asia and links the Mediterranean with the Red Sea. Watching super-tankers gliding through the desert as they ply the narrow channel is a bizarre spectacle. A hotly contested triumph of modern engineering, the canal opened in 1869 and remains one of the world's busiest shipping lanes. The best way to see the canal is by boat; the view from the Peace Bridge that crosses the canal near Isma'iliya, is a good second best.

PORT SAID

☎ 066 / pop 539,000

With its wooden buildings and Escher-like labyrinth of condemned balconies Port Said is a ramshackle town that nonetheless retains a colonial charm. An obligatory stop for cruise liners using the canal, Port Said is accustomed to visitors. Chances are you'll be waved into Woolworths near the ferry terminal – a quaint 19th-century building of more interest than its wares.

Banque du Caire and National Bank of Egypt have ATMs and you can change travellers cheques at **Thomas Cook** (☎ 322 7559; 🕒 8am-4.30pm), next to the petrol station. On Sharia Palestine you'll find **Amex** (🕒 9am-2pm & 6.30-8pm Sun-Thu), the **main post office** (🕒 8.30am-2.30pm), **telephone centrales** (🕒 24hr) and a helpful **tourist office** (☎ 323 5289; 🕒 9am-6pm Sat-Thu, 9am-2pm Fri). Internet access is available from **Compu.Net** (per hr E£3; 🕒 9am-midnight), opposite the main post office.

Sights & Activities

The **National Museum** (☎ 323 7419) is currently closed but the **Military Museum** (☎ 322 4657; Sharia 23rd of Jul; admission E£5; 🕒 9am-4pm Fri-Wed, 9am-10pm Thu) has some interesting relics from the 1956 Suez crisis.

The easiest way to explore the mouth of the canal is to take the free public ferry from near the tourist office to Port Fuad and back.

Sleeping & Eating

Youth Hostel (☎ 322 8702; port-said-y.h@hotmail.com; Sharia 23rd of Jul; dm Hl members/nonmembers E£13.25/15.25, f per person E£30.25; 🍴 📺) This enormous, friendly hostel, at the end of the New Corniche, has worn but clean dorms.

Hotel de la Poste (☎ /fax 322 4048; 42 Sharia al-Gomhuriyya; s/d E£39/49; 🍴) Faded but elegant,

this spotless hotel is the town's best-value option. You can buy breakfast in the popular hotel patisserie.

Sonesta (☎ 332 5511; sonesta@iec.egnet.net; s/d city view US\$137/186, canal view US\$186/230; 🍴 📺) This excellent four-star choice is positioned at the entrance to the canal. Its poolside café is the perfect spot for ship-watching.

Pizza Pino (☎ 323 9949; cnr Sharias 23rd of Jul & al-Gomhuriyya; pasta E£7-22, pizza E£11-25) This bright and friendly place serves delicious sundaes.

El-Borg (☎ 332 3442; New Corniche; meals E£25-50; 🕒 10am-3am) Choose your fish from the day's catch at this cavernous fish restaurant.

There's a popular terrace *ahwa* in front of Grand Albatross Building on the New Corniche where locals linger over *sheeshas* (water pipes).

Getting There & Away

Uncomfortable trains (E£18 in 2nd class, five hours) run to Cairo four times a day. It's better to take the bus (E£13.50 to E£17, three hours, hourly). Other services include Alexandria (E£20 to E£22, four hours, four daily), Luxor (E£60, 12 to 13 hours) and Hurghada (E£45, 7½ hours). Taxi fares from the bus station into town (3km) cost E£5. Taxi fares within town cost E£2. Service taxis leave from the bus station and cost E£15 to Cairo.

RED SEA COAST

Sadly, the once-idyllic Red Sea Coast is being spoiled by unattractive construction projects, particularly around the soulless city of Hurghada. The village of Al-Quseir has so far escaped mass development but not for long, we suspect.

For world-class diving in the area, contact **Shagara Eco-Lodge** (☎ in Cairo 02-337 1833; www.redsea-divingsafaris.com; Marsa Shagra; d with full board in tents/huts/chalets US\$88/100/125).

HURGHADA

☎ 065

Catering for more than 96,000 tourists annually and comprising environmentally disastrous resorts, there's little to commend Hurghada. Even its once-glorious coral reefs have been degraded. The only compensation for travellers is that it offers an alternative route to Sinai from the Nile Valley.

Orientation & Information

Most budget hotels are in Ad-Dahar, north of the resorts. The port is at Sigala. South of Sigala is the 1.5km upmarket 'resort strip'.

Most banks in Hurghada have ATMs. **Express.Net** (☎ 012 316 2770; resort strip; per hr E£12; 🕒 noon-midnight) Internet access, in West Side Mall.

Main post office (Sharia an-Nasr, Ad-Dahar)

Telephone centrale (Sharia an-Nasr, Ad-Dahar; 🕒 24hr)

Thomas Cook (☎ 354 1870/1; Sharia an-Nasr, Ad-Dahar; 🕒 9am-2pm & 6-10pm).

Tourist office (☎ 344 4421; 🕒 8am-8pm) On the resort strip.

Sights & Activities

Recommended dive centres include **Dive Too** (☎ 340 8414; www.divetoo.net; Seagull Resort, Sharia Sheraton, Sigala) and **Easy Divers** (☎ 354 7816; www.easydivers-redsea.com; Triton Empire Beach Hotel, Corniche, Ad-Dahar).

Popular tours go to the isolated Coptic **monasteries of St Anthony and St Paul** (🕒 9am-5pm). A taxi from Hurghada costs US\$58.

Sleeping

Royal City Hotel (☎ 344 7729; fax 344 7195; Sigala; s/d E£80/120; 🍴) Near the port, this old favourite is clean and comfortable.

Zak Royal Wings Hotel (☎ 344 6012; www.zakhotel.com; Sharia al-Hadaba, Sigala; s/d US\$21/32; 🍴 📺) Good value poolside rooms next to Papas Bar.

Giftun Beach Resort (☎ 346 3040; www.giftunbeachresort.com; resort strip; s/d all-inclusive US\$52/81; 🍴 📺 📺) With chalet-style rooms, diving and windsurfing facilities (from E£25 per hour), this is a recommended resort.

Oberoi Sahl Hasheesh (☎ 344 0777; www.oberoihotels.com; Sahl Hasheesh, resort strip; ste from US\$310; 🍴 📺 📺) In Hurghada's most opulent hotel, Moorish-style rooms have sunken marble baths, walled private courtyards and panoramic sea views.

Eating & Drinking

Taibeen (☎ 354 7260; Sharia Soliman Mazhar, Ad-Dahar; dishes E£3-15) This competent trattoria uses only fresh local ingredients.

Rossi Restaurant (☎ 344 7676; Sharia Sheraton, Sigala; mains E£17-50) Popular with the diving fraternity, solo women may feel less conspicuous here.

Portofino (☎ 354 6250; Sharia Sayyed al-Qorayem, Ad-Dahar; 🍴) Portofino offers recommended three-course set menus from E£26.50.

Shanghai Chinese Restaurant (☎ 012 239 6840; Esplanada Bay Mall, resort strip; mains ££30-40; 🍷) This stylish, seaside restaurant prepares delicious fresh seafood (from ££35).

Papas Bar (www.papasbar.com; Rossi Restaurant, Sharia Sheraton, Sigala) Patronised by diving instructors and foreign residents, Papas has a great entertainment programme that rotates between Liquid Lounge and Papas II.

Opposite Seagull Resort, El-Arabi Coffee Shop is a popular tea-and-sheesha spot.

Getting There & Around

The **International Airport** (☎ 344 2592) is 6km southwest of town. **EgyptAir** (☎ 344 3592/3; resort strip) has daily flights to Cairo (££740, one hour). A taxi to/from town costs between ££10 and ££20 (there are no buses).

A luxury high-speed ferry operated by **International Fast Ferries Co** (☎ 344 7571; www.internationalfastferries.com) departs for Sharm el-Sheikh four times a week from the port in Sigala (one way US\$44, 1½ hours). Tickets are payable in US dollars.

Superjet's bus station is near the main mosque in Ad-Dahar. It offers services to Cairo (££55 to ££57, six hours, three daily) and Alexandria (££83, nine hours). At the southern end of Ad-Dahar other services leave for Luxor (££30, five hours, four daily) and Al-Quseir (££20, three hours, three daily). The El Gouna Bus Co bus station is on Sharia Al-Nasr in Ad-Dahar, offering 10 daily services to Cairo (from ££40).

It is compulsory for foreigners to travel from Hurghada to Cairo and Luxor by convoy. Check current timings with the tourist office.

The service taxi station is near the telephone centrale in Ad-Dahar. Taxis go to Cairo (££35) and Al-Quseir (££15 to ££20). It costs about ££200 per vehicle (up to seven passengers) to Luxor as part of the police convoy.

From Ad-Dahar to the resort strip costs ££10 by minibus. Bargaining is essential. El Gouna Bus Co operates a half-hourly service (££5) between Ad-Dahar and the end of Sharia Sheraton in Sigala.

AL-QUSEIR

☎ 065 / pop 25,000

Until the 10th century, Al-Quseir was an important transit point for travellers to Mecca. Later it became an entrepôt for Indian spices destined for Europe. Today it has a sleepy charm absent from other Red Sea towns.

An **Ottoman fortress** (admission ££5; 🕒 9am-5pm) and old coral-block buildings line the waterfront, punctuated by the domed tombs of various saints – pilgrims who died en route to Mecca.

Diving trips and desert excursions can be arranged with **Mazenar Tours** (☎ 333 5247, 012 265 5044; rockyvalleycamp@yahoo.dk; Sharia Port Said).

For internet access, try **Hot Line Internet Café** (Sharia Port Said; per hr ££10; 🕒 9am-3am). There's also a 24-hour telephone centrale, a National Bank of Egypt branch (no ATM) and a post office.

Sleeping & Eating

The budget accommodation options in town are not recommended.

Al-Quseir Hotel (☎ 333 2301; Sharia Port Said; s/d ££112/157; 🍷) This charming 1920s merchant's house on the seafront has rooms with clean shared bathrooms.

Mövenpick Sirena Beach (☎ 333 2100; www.moevenpick-quseir.com; r from US\$200; 🍷 📺 📶) This domed ensemble, 7km north of town, is one of the Red Sea's best resorts. The chain is renowned for its environmentally sensitive approach.

Try **Restaurant Marianne** (☎ 333 4386; Sharia Port Said; dishes ££15-50) for good grilled fish. Locals lounge in **Sahraya Coffeehouse** (Sharia Port Said) on the waterfront.

Getting There & Around

The bus and service-taxi stations are 1.5km northwest of the Safaga road (££3 by taxi). There are buses to Cairo (££57, 11 hours, five daily) via Safaga (££5, two hours) and Hurghada (££15, three hours).

Service taxi destinations include Cairo (££43, 10½ hours), Hurghada (££10, 2¾ hours) and Safaga (££6, two hours). As in Hurghada, you have to hire the entire taxi for the trip to Luxor (from ££250, eight hours).

Microbus fares around town are between 50pt and ££1.

MEDITERRANEAN COAST

Crowned by the historic city of Alexandria, the Mediterranean Coast has two distinct characters. To the west, the Western Desert impinges on the coast, characterised by an almost continuous strip of Egyptian holiday resorts. To the east, the fertile Nile Delta spills

across a seldom-visited area of rice paddies, date plantations and cotton fields.

ALEXANDRIA

☎ 03 / pop 3.8 million

Alexandria (Al-Iskendariyya), with its *belle époque* buildings and grand squares, good coffee and French pastries, has a faded charm that few visitors can resist. Arranged around bays that are currently revealing all kinds of sunken treasure, Alexandria is an easy city to explore and is mercifully free from touts.

History

Established in 332 BC by Alexander the Great, the city became a major trade centre and focal point of learning for the entire Mediterranean. Its ancient library held 500,000 volumes and the Pharos lighthouse was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Alexandria continued as the capital of Egypt under the Roman and Byzantine Empires until the 4th century. The city thereafter went into decline until the 19th century, when Napoleon revived Alexandria as a major port. Despite the 1952 Revolution, in which the nationalistic mood of the moment expelled most foreign interests and stripped the city of its expatriate contingency, something of the city's cosmopolitan character remains.

Orientation

Nearly 20km long from east to west and only about 3km wide, Alexandria is a true waterfront city. The focal point is Midan Ramla, also known as Mahattat Ramla (Ramla station), the terminus for the city's tramlines. Immediately adjacent is Midan Saad Zaghloul, a large square running to the seafront. Most traveller amenities are centred around these two *midans*.

Information

There are many exchange bureaux between Midan Ramla and the corniche and along Sharia Talaat Harb.

HSBC Bank (47 Sharia Sultan Hussein) There's an ATM here and another in the foyer of Le Metropole Hotel.

Main post office Two blocks east of Midan Orabi.

Main tourist office (☎ 485 1556; Midan Saad Zaghloul; 🕒 8.30am-6pm) This helpful place is beneath the tourist police station.

MG@Net (per hr ££2; 🕒 10am-midnight) Internet access, near Midan Saad Zaghloul.

Passport office (28 Sharia Talaat Harb; 🕒 8am-1.30pm Sat-Thu) For visa extensions; it's off Sharia Salah Salem.

Telephone centrale (Midan Gomhurriya; 🕒 24hr)

Thomas Cook (☎ 484 7830; 15 Sharia Saad Zaghloul; 🕒 8am-5pm) The best option for cashing travellers cheques.

Zawia Computer Internet Café (☎ 484 8014; Sharia Dr Hassan Fadaly; per hr ££4; 🕒 11am-11pm)

Sights

Relics retrieved from the seabed are displayed at the **Alexandria National Museum** (Sharia Tariq al-Horreyya; adult/student ££30/15; 🕒 9am-4pm), just east of the city centre.

The marble terraces of the only **Roman Amphitheatre** (Sharia Yousef; adult/student ££15/10; 🕒 9am-5pm) in Egypt were discovered in 1964. Also worth seeing is the 'Villa of the Birds' **mosaic** (adult/student ££10/5) in the grounds.

Dating from the 2nd century AD, the honeycomb **Catacombs of Kom Ash-Suqqafa** (Carmous; adult/student ££20/10; 🕒 8am-5pm) once housed 300 corpses – and a rather macabre funeral **dining chamber** used for wakes. The **principal tomb** combines Egyptian, Greek and Roman iconography.

The catacombs are a five-minute walk from the famed and misnamed **Pompey's Pillar** (adult/student ££10/5; 🕒 8am-5pm), the top of which once hosted a party of 22. Louis XIV of France nearly took it home as a plinth for his own statue.

Recently restored, **Fort Qaitbey** (adult/student ££20/15; 🕒 9am-4pm), at the end of the corniche, was built on the foundations of the destroyed Pharos lighthouse in 1480.

Inspired by the original library, founded in the early 3rd century BC and hailed as the greatest of all classical institutions, **Bibliotheca Alexandrina** (☎ 483 9999; www.bibalex.org; Corniche al-Bahr; adult/student main library ££10/5, antiquities museum ££20/10, manuscript collection ££20/10; 🕒 11am-7pm Sun, Mon, Wed & Thu, 3-7pm Fri & Sat) is an attempt to put the city back on the world's cultural map. Note the external frieze in letters, pictograms, hieroglyphs and symbols from every known alphabet.

Objects of interest in the **Graeco-Roman Museum** (☎ 483 6434; 5 Sharia al-Mathaf ar-Romani) include a carved head of Cleopatra and terracotta lanterns depicting the ancient Pharos lighthouse. The museum is currently closed.

Activities

Underwater excavations are ongoing in the eastern harbour and around Fort Qaitbey, bringing to light pavements, platforms, statues and red-granite columns – remnants perhaps

of 'Cleopatra's Palace'. **Alexandra Dive** (☎ 483 2042; www.alexandra-dive.com) offers diving tours of the submerged harbour sites. The office is situated in the grounds of the Fish Market complex on the corniche near Fort Qaitbey.

Window-shopping is a fun activity in Alexandria as there is relatively little pressure to buy, unlike in the rest of Egypt's tourist destinations. Lightweight, hand-painted, glass perfume bottles (E€5 to E€10) make an attractive gift.

Sleeping

Alexandria is one of the few Egyptian cities where hotel rates stay the same year-round.

New Capri Hotel (☎/fax 480 9703, ☎ 480 9310; 8th fl, 23 Sharia el-Mina el-Sharkia; s/d E€39/56) Dilapidated

but vaguely charming, New Capri Hotel has a harbour-view breakfast room.

Union Hotel (☎ 480 7312; fax 480 7350; 5th fl, 164 Corniche; s/d E€52/70, with air-con E€171/196; ☎) With clean and comfortable rooms, some with harbour views, this is the best budget option. Breakfast is E€8 extra.

Crillon Hotel (☎ 480 0330; 3rd fl, 5 Sharia Adib Ishaq; s/d with private bathroom or view E€60/90) This old-fashioned establishment has polished floors and French windows. Many rooms have harbour views.

Windsor Palace Hotel (☎ 480 8700; www.paradiseinnegypt.com; 17 Al-Shohada St; s US\$100-135, d US\$120-155; ☎) This elegant period-piece of a hotel, with antique lift and mirrored lounge, has stately rooms with harbour views.

Le Metropole Hotel (☎ 484 0910; resamet@paradiseinnegypt.com; 52 Sharia Saad Zaghloul; s US\$100-135, d US\$120-155; ☎) Another four-star hotel, with high ceilings and ornate cornices that hint at Alexandria's 19th-century heyday.

Cecil Hotel (☎ 487 7173; h1726@accor-hotels.com; 16 Midan Saad Zaghloul; s/d/ste from US\$144/170/291; ☎) The Cecil is a veritable institution in Alexandria. Now run by the Sofitel chain, its progression of famous guests, in-house entertainment and elegant interior make it worth a visit if not an overnight.

Eating & Drinking

Cheap eating venues abound between Sharia Safiyya Zaghloul and Midan Ramla, and along Sharia Shakor Pasha.

Mohamed Ahmed (☎ 483 3576; 17 Sharia Shakor Pasha; dishes E€1-10) Popular with locals for the tasty *ta'amiyya*, *fuul* and fried cheese, this place's filling meals are good value. You can sit down or take away.

Restaurant el-Shark (Sharia Hassan ash-Seikh) This is an amiable place to sample local specialities such as grilled dove (E€8), gizzard soup (E€3) and *fatta* (E€3.50 to E€15.50), which comprises rice and bread soured in vinegar with lamb or chicken.

Elite (☎ 486 3592; 43 Sharia Safiyya Zaghloul; dishes E€3.50-31; ☎) The ever-popular Elite is an odd mixture of 1950s diner and elegant coffeeshop, serving an equally odd mixture of dishes.

Kadoura (Corniche; per person around E€50; ☎ 9am-3am; ☎) At Alexandria's most famous restaurant, you can choose your fish from the day's catch and park at one of the no-nonsense tables while it's cooked. Disappointingly, the staff are rather cold fish too.

Fish Market (☎ 480 5114; per person around E€70; ☎) While not quite as characterful as Kadoura, the seafood here is equally fresh with a wide variety to choose from and numerous attendant *mezze* (E€4). The harbour views are fun – the waiters alas are not.

Alexandria is famous for its cafés and coffeeshops, where an accompanying pastry is *de rigueur*. The **Brazilian Coffee Store** (Sharia Saad Zaghloul) is the oldest coffeeshop in the city. **Tranon Café** (Metropole Hotel; 52 Sharia Saad Zaghloul), with its Parisienne interior, or the elegant **Délices** (☎ 486 1432; 46 Sharia Saad Zaghloul) both offer cappuccino for E€7 and mouth-watering gateaux from E€4. Try the Rum Baba with a shot of brandy at Délices.

Getting There & Away BUS

The 15th of May bus station is behind Sidi Gaber train station. The tram trip from Midan Ramla takes 30 minutes. There are services to Cairo (E€28, 2½ hours) every 30 minutes from 5.30am to 10pm.

Hourly buses to Marsa Matruh (E€23, 4½ hours) go via El Alamein (E€15, two hours). Daily buses to Siwa (E€27, nine hours) leave at 7.30am, 11am and 10pm. Other services go to Sallum (E€23, eight hours, six daily), Sharm el-Sheikh (E€88, 10½ hours, two daily), Port Said (E€24, four hours, five daily) and Hurghada (E€85, nine hours).

SERVICE TAXI

Service taxis to Cairo (among other cities) leave from Moharrem Bey taxi station (around E€10, three hours). A taxi from Moharrem Bey to Midan Ramla costs E€5, or catch tram 6.

TRAIN

Cairo-bound trains depart from **Misir train station**, Alexandria's main terminus, and nearby **Sidi Gaber train station**, next to the main bus station. The fastest and most comfortable trains are the express *Turbini* (E€36/28 in 1st/2nd class, 2¼ hours), which leave at 8am, 2pm and 7pm. To be assured of seats, book ahead.

The **Abela Egypt Sleeping Train** (☎ 393 2430; www.sleepingtrains.com) travels daily to Aswan, via Cairo and Luxor, and leaves at 5.20pm. It arrives in Luxor at 5.25am the next day and terminates in Aswan at 8.50am. It costs US\$56/74 per person one way in a double/single cabin. Tickets must be paid for in US dollars or euros. The price includes a basic dinner and breakfast.

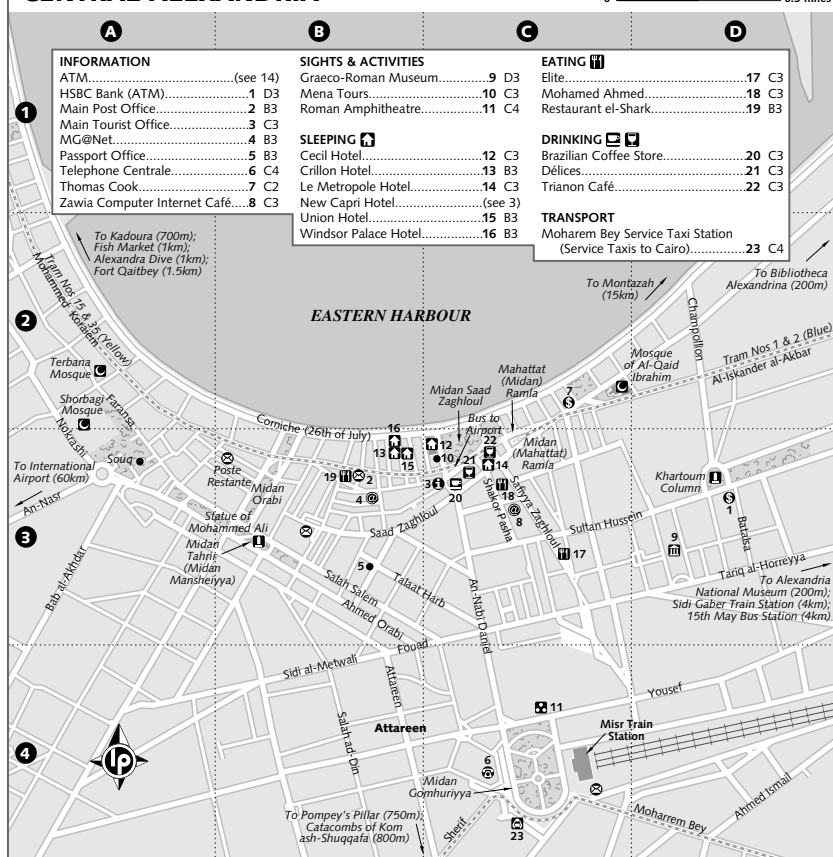
It costs E€5 for a taxi from the Misir train station to Midan Ramla, or E€10 for a taxi from the parking area.

Getting Around

The **international airport** (☎ 425 0527) is at Burg al-Arab, 60km west of the city. To reach the airport, take Bus 555 (E€6, one hour) from near Cecil Hotel or take a taxi (E€80).

A short *calèche* (horse-drawn carriage) or taxi trip costs about E€10 but most people rely on the efficient tram service. Midan Ramla is the main station; from here, yellow-coloured trams go west and blue-coloured trams go

CENTRAL ALEXANDRIA



east. All tickets cost 25pt. The following are the most useful routes:

Tram no Route

1 & 2	Ramla to Victoria, via the sporting club & Rushdy
6	Moharrem Bey to Ras el-Tin
15	Ramla to Ras el-Tin via El-Gomruk & Anfushi
16	Midan St Katerina to Pompey's Pillar
25	Ras el-Tin to Sidi Gaber, via Ramla
36	Ras el-Tin to San Stefano & Sidi Gaber

EL ALAMEIN

The battle at El Alamein, 105km west of Alexandria, was a turning point of WWII. Today a **war museum** (admission E£5; ☎ 9am-4pm) and **cemeteries** mark the scene of one of the biggest tank battles in history.

The easiest way to visit El Alamein is to organise a car and English-speaking driver through **Mena Tours** (☎ 480 9676; fax 486 5827; Midan Saad Zaghloul; ☎ 9am-6pm Sat-Thu), based next to the Cecil Hotel in Alexandria, for approximately E£350. A private taxi charges between E£150 and E£200 for the round trip.

The journey, past a continuous string of resorts that receive few foreign visitors, is made interesting only by the stone quarries by the side of the road and numerous elaborately constructed dovecotes.

WESTERN DESERT

Forming the northeast flank of the Sahara, the Western Desert spreads from the banks of the Nile towards Libya, covering 2.8 million sq km. The Arabs refer to the area as 'the land abandoned by God' and much of it remains unexplored. The landscape is bizarre and beautiful in equal measure, and a journey through the desert's main oases makes a fascinating alternative route from Cairo to Luxor. Siwa, near the Libyan border, is more easily reached from Alexandria.

For ecologically sound desert trips in the area, **Desert Eco Tours** (www.desertecotour.com) is recommended.

SIWA OASIS

☎ 046

Ringed by salt lakes, dunes and desert escarpment, Siwa is a haven of date plantations and olive groves. It has a distinctive Berber culture, preserved due to its relative isolation – an

asphalt road to the coast was only constructed in the 1980s. With the 13th-century *shali* (fortress) at its core, there's plenty to potter round while relaxing into the rhythm of life in the slow lane.

Women need to be careful if wandering alone in plantations or bathing in springs. Several assaults have been reported. North of the main square, **El Negma Internet Centre** (☎ 460 0761; per hr E£10; ☎ 9am-midnight) is near the *shali*. **Banque du Caire** (☎ 8.30am-2pm & 5-8pm) has an ATM and there's also a post office and helpful **tourist office** (☎ 9am-5pm Sat-Thu).

Siwa's attractions include **springs** where you can swim, the remains of the **Temple of the Oracle**, where Alexander came to confirm his divinity, and some Graeco-Roman **tombs**. At the edge of town are the towering dunes of the **Great Sand Sea**.

There are innumerable safari companies in Siwa, most of which charge around E£100 to visit the Great Sand Sea and E£120 for an overnight camping trip to White Mountain and Lubbaq Oasis. You can hire **sand boards** at the Nour el-Wahaa Restaurant.

The best buy in town are locally grown dates and olives.

Sleeping & Eating

Make sure your hotel room has screened windows – the mosquitoes are voracious in Siwa.

Yousef Hotel (☎ 460 0678; s/d E£10/20) In the town centre, this backpacker favourite offers reasonable rooms but no breakfast.

Palm Trees Hotel (☎ 460 1703; salahali2@yahoo.com; d E£35, s/d without bathroom E£15/25) A palm-filled garden partially compensates for grotty bathrooms. Breakfast is E£5.

Kilany Hotel (☎ 460 1052; zaitsafari@yahoo.com; d E£50) Too near the mosque for a lie-in, the roof terrace here is good for a snooze later. Breakfast is E£10.

Shali Lodge (☎ 460 1299; info@eqi.com.eg; Sharia el-Seboukha; s/d E£200/260; 🍷) A night at this romantic mudbrick hotel set in a plantation near the main square is recommended. Breakfast costs E£12.

There are cheap chicken-and-salad restaurants on the market square, including Elahar Chicken Restaurant, recommended by travellers.

Nour el-Wahaa Restaurant (☎ 460 0293; dishes E£5-15) In palm groves near the Shali Lodge hotel, this attractive garden restaurant is the place to

relax over a *sheesha* (E£4.50) and mint tea (E£3). Try *molokhiyya*, a stewed leaf soup (E£5).

Abdo Restaurant (☎ 460 1243; ☎ 8.30am-midnight) Beloved by backpackers and locals alike, Abdo's serves tasty vegetable couscous (E£10).

Getting There & Around

There are three daily buses to (and from) Alexandria (E£27, eight hours). Buses are often full so buy a ticket in advance from West Delta Bus Co near the Sports Centre.

There is no public transport along the half-finished road linking the oases of Siwa and Bahariyya. Some 4WD owners in town take passengers (approximately E£1300, 10 hours) but you'll need a road permit (US\$10 per person).

Donkey carts within town cost E£5. Bone-rattling bikes from the main square cost E£10 per day.

BAHARIYYA OASIS

☎ 011

Bahariyya, the nearest oasis to Cairo, has a friendly atmosphere. It's surrounded by a striking black desert and Pyramid Mountain, where significant dinosaur remains have been found. Buses bring you to Bawiti, the dusty main village.

The **tourist office** (☎ 847 3039; Main St, Bawiti; ☎ 8am-2pm & 7-9pm Sat-Thu) is open at whim. The **National Bank of Development** (☎ 8am-2pm Sun-Thu), near the tourist office, changes money but not travellers cheques.

Attractions include the **Temple of Alexander**, tombs at **Qarat Qasr Salim**, and 10 of the 10,000 famous Graeco-Roman **mummies**, which are on show near the **Antiquities Inspectorate Ticket Office** (admission to 6 sites E£30; ☎ 8.30am-4pm).

Sleeping & Eating

Ahmed's Safari Camp (☎ /fax 847 2090; ahmed_safari@hotmail.com; camping per person E£10, huts per person E£10, s/d E£40/80, with air-con E£70/100; 🍷 🍷 🍷) A favourite with trans-Africa groups, this camp is 4km outside Bawiti, on the road to Farafra. It has a 24-hour restaurant, kitchen garden, safari company, bakery, and swimming pool fed by a hot spring.

Western Desert Hotel (☎ 847 1600; www.westerndeserthotel.com; Bawiti; s/d US\$24/30; 🍷 🍷) This spotless and friendly hotel, opposite the Popular Restaurant in the centre of town, has a roof terrace and restaurant serving home-style Egyptian dishes.

Alpenblick Hotel (☎ 847 2184; alpenblick@hotmail.com; Bawiti; s E£45, d E£90, without bathroom E£60) Rooms are clean and bright, with screened windows and fans.

International Hot Springs Hotel (☎ 847 3014; www.whitedeserttours.com; s/d with half board US\$45/70; 🍷 🍷) This highly recommended hotel, with hot springs in a sheltered courtyard, has spotless chalet rooms with bathroom, fan and screened windows. Located 1km outside Bawiti on the Cairo Rd, it's not a very attractive hotel, but it's well run and the owner, Peter Wirth, is a veteran of the Western Desert and can organise excursions.

Food options are limited to the hotels, a basic cafeteria near the petrol station or the town's **Popular Restaurant** (☎ 847 2239; set meal E£20; ☎ 5am-midnight), which lives up to its name and offers good set meals.

Getting There & Away

Buses travel to Cairo (E£20, four hours) daily at 1pm and 1am. For Farafra (E£20, two hours) or Dakhla (E£30, five hours), buses from Cairo stop in front of the Paradise Hotel. See p123 for information about travel permits between Bahariyya and Siwa.

FARAFRA OASIS

☎ 092

The smallest of the oases, Farafra is the best place from which to visit the spectacular **White Desert** – an outstanding area of windblown rock formations. The only tourist attraction in town is **Badr's Museum** (☎ 751 0091; admission E£5; ☎ 8.30am-sunset), a gallery run by enthusiastic local artist Badr Moghny.

El-Waha (Oasis) Hotel (☎ 751 0040; hamdyhamoud@hotmail.com; s/d E£20/40, without bathroom E£15/30) is basic but bearable with dubious shared bathrooms; the owner's new Arabia Safari Camp may be a better bet.

The Bedouin-owned **Al-Badawiya Hotel** (☎ 751 1163; www.badawiya.com; s/d E£105/170; 🍷) is built of mudbricks around a central courtyard. Some rooms are split-level with whimsical mosquito nets. The restaurant (breakfast E£15, lunch E£35, dinner E£45) is the best place to eat in town, with home-style lamb and potato stews, and fresh lime juice (E£3). Desert trips can be arranged from here, including a three-hour 4WD excursion to the nearby White Desert (from E£150).

Buses travel to Cairo (E£40, seven to nine hours) via Bahariyya (E£20, 2½ hours) daily

at 10.30am and 10.30pm. Buses coming from Cairo go on to Dakhla (€€20, 4½ hours, two daily) and leave from outside the shops at the Dakhla end of the main street.

DAKHLA OASIS

☎ 092

The oasis of Dakhla contains two small towns, **Mut** and **Al-Qasr**. Mut is the larger, with most of the hotels.

The **tourist office** (☎ 782 1685/6; Sharia as-Sawra al-Khadra; ☹ 8am-3pm) is on Mut's main road. The Abu Mohamed Restaurant, opposite the tourist office, offers **internet access** (per hr €€10; ☹ 7am-midnight). In Mut, **Bank Misr** (Sharia Al-Wadi) changes cash and travellers cheques, and gives advances on Visa and MasterCard; it doesn't have an ATM.

There are 600 **hot springs** in the vicinity and an atmospheric mudbrick citadel at Al-Qasr with a small **Ethnographic Museum** (admission €€3; ☹ variable). In exchange for baksheesh, aged local guides escort you through the citadel's narrow alleyways, unlock *madrassas*, houses and mosques, and show you working forges. Local traders congregate outside the citadel to sell basketry, including rakish straw hats with ribbon trim (€€20), worn by local farmers.

Sleeping & Eating

El-Kasr Hotel (☎ 787 6013; Al-Qasr; to sleep on roof €€3, beds €€10) Conveniently located on the main road near the old town, El-Kasr is the best backpacker option in town.

Bedouin Oasis Village (☎ 782 0070; bedouin_oasis_village@hotmail.com; Mut; s/d €€50/60, without bathroom €€30/50; 🍷) This attractive mudbrick building with outdoor terrace and fort-style annexe is good value.

Beir Elgabal Camp (☎ 787 6600; elgabalcamp@hotmail.com; s/d €€50/100, without bathroom €€35/70) Run by Bedouin, this peaceful and attractive camp is located at the foot of the escarpment. There are mud or concrete rooms, or you can pitch a tent and use a bathroom for €€20. Dinner costs €€20.

Desert Lodge (☎ 734 5960; www.desertlodge.net; s/d half board US\$45/60; 🍷 🍷) Perched on a hill near the escarpment overlooking Al-Qasr, this fort-style ecolodge has added some desert whimsy to the landscape. With a billiard room, giant outdoor chess set, licensed restaurant, and Bedouin tent for evening *sheeshas*, it's hard to find the motivation for the desert safaris on offer.

A couple of good restaurants are recommended in town, including the long-established **Abu Mohamed Restaurant** (☎ 782 1431; Sharia as-Sawra al-Khadra; dishes €€8-10) and **Ahmed Hamdy's Restaurant** (☎ 782 0767; Sharia as-Sawra al-Khadra; dishes €€16), popular with the local police.

Getting There & Around

Buses leave from the main square in Mut at 6am and 6pm travelling to Farafra (€€20, 4½ hours), Bahariyya (€€20, seven hours) and Cairo (€€45, eight to 10 hours). Buses leave at 7pm and 8.30pm travelling to Al-Kharga (€€10, 2½ hours) and Cairo (€€50 to €€55, 11 hours).

Service taxis travel to Farafra and Al-Kharga for the same costs. They depart from near the new mosque when full.

Local pick-ups depart from near the police station in Mut and travel to Al-Qasr for 75pt. Abu Mohamed Restaurant hires out bikes for €€10 per day.

KHARGA OASIS

☎ 092

Except for the impressive **Antiquities Museum** (Sharia Gamal Abdel Nasser; adult/student €€20/10; ☹ 9am-4pm), which houses mummies and gilded masks, embalmed birds and rams, the town of Al-Kharga is of little interest. You are likely to be escorted by police from your arrival in town.

There's a helpful **tourist office** (☎ 792 1206; Midan Nasser; ☹ 8am-3pm, variable evening hours Sat-Thu), and **Banque du Caire** (off Sharia Gamal Abdel Nasser) has an ATM and changes cash and travellers cheques.

North of town is the well-preserved **Temple of Hibis** (admission €€10; ☹ 8am-5pm), built by the Persian emperor Darius I. To the east you'll find the remains of the **Temple of An-Nadura**, built by the Romans, and nearby 4th-century Coptic **Necropolis of Al-Bagawat**. South of town are the fortified Roman temples of **Qasr al-Ghueita** and **Qasr az-Zayyan**.

You can camp in the palm-filled garden of the affable **Kharga Oasis Hotel** (☎ 792 1500; Midan Nasser; s/d with fan €€63/88, with air-con €€70/95; 🍷) for €€7.50 per person and use the shared bathrooms for a few piastres more. Behind the museum is clean and comfortable **El-Radwan Hotel** (☎ 792 9897; s/d €€50/80; 🍷). Four-star, pink confection **Soly Mar Pioneers** (☎ 792 7982; www.soly-mar-hotels.com; Sharia Gamal Abdel Nasser; s/d with half board €€530/701; 🍷 🍷 🍷) is a favourite with Egyptian businessmen. Dinner costs €€55.

Restaurants are scarce in Kharga. Eat in the hotels or try Al-Ahram, at the front of the Waha Hotel on Sharia an-Nabawi, which sells cheap roast chicken and salads.

Checkpoints between Al-Kharga and Luxor close at 4pm, so start your trip in either direction before midday.

Buses leave from the bus station behind Midan Basateen. Services include Cairo (€€40 to €€45, eight hours, three daily) and Dakhla (€€8, two hours, five daily). The 2pm and 1am buses connect with the 6pm and 6am buses to Farafra, Bahariyya and Cairo. Services to Luxor (€€35, five hours) depart on Tuesday and Saturday at 1pm, and on Sunday and Wednesday at 7am.

Minibuses to Dakhla cost €€9 and leave from the bus station.

NILE VALLEY

Measuring 6680km in length, the Nile is the world's longest river. It brought the nation of Egypt into being and its banks are clustered with the temples and tombs of the country's illustrious past. Luxor and Aswan are the jewels in the crown and few can resist time spent on the water itself.

LUXOR

☎ 095 / pop 422,400

Built around the 4000-year-old site of Thebes, the ancient capital of the New Kingdom, contemporary Luxor is an eccentric combination of provincial town and staggering ancient splendour. The concentration of monuments is extraordinary: they tower incongruously above the buzz of everyday life and make this a most compelling destination.

Orientation

Luxor comprises the town of Luxor on the East Bank of the Nile; the village of Karnak, 2km to the northeast; and the villages and ancient monuments on the West Bank of the Nile.

In town, there are three main thoroughfares: Sharia al-Mahatt (running from the station to Luxor Temple), Sharia al-Karnak (Luxor Temple to the Temples of Karnak) and the corniche. Most budget hotels are located between the train station and Sharia Televizyon. Banks, the main tourist office and other services are clustered around the Old Winter Palace Hotel on the corniche.

Information

There are ATMs at Banque du Caire and National Bank of Egypt on the corniche.

Aboudi (☎ 237 2390; Corniche el-Nil; per hr €€10;

☹ 9am-10pm) Internet access.

Amex (☎ 237 8333; Old Winter Palace Hotel, Corniche el-Nil; ☹ 9am-4.30pm)

Main post office (Sharia al-Mahatta)

Main tourist office (☎ /fax 237 2215; Corniche el-Nil; ☹ 8am-8pm) This helpful place is in the Tourist Bazaar.

Passport office (☎ 238 0885; ☹ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu) For visa extensions; opposite the Isis Pyramis Hotel.

Rainbow Net (☎ 238 7938; Sharia Yousef Hassan; per hr €€6; ☹ 9am-midnight) Internet access.

Telephone centrale (☹ 8am-10pm) By the Old Winter Palace Hotel.

Thomas Cook (☎ 237 2196; Old Winter Palace Hotel, Corniche el-Nil; ☹ 8am-2pm & 3-8pm)

Sights

EAST BANK

The **Luxor Museum** (Corniche el-Nil; adult/student €€55/30; ☹ 9am-2pm & 4-9pm) has a select collection of Theban relics and an informative video presentation. To learn more about the ancient journey into afterlife, visit the **Mummification Museum** (Corniche el-Nil; adult/student €€40/20; ☹ 9am-1pm & 4-9pm).

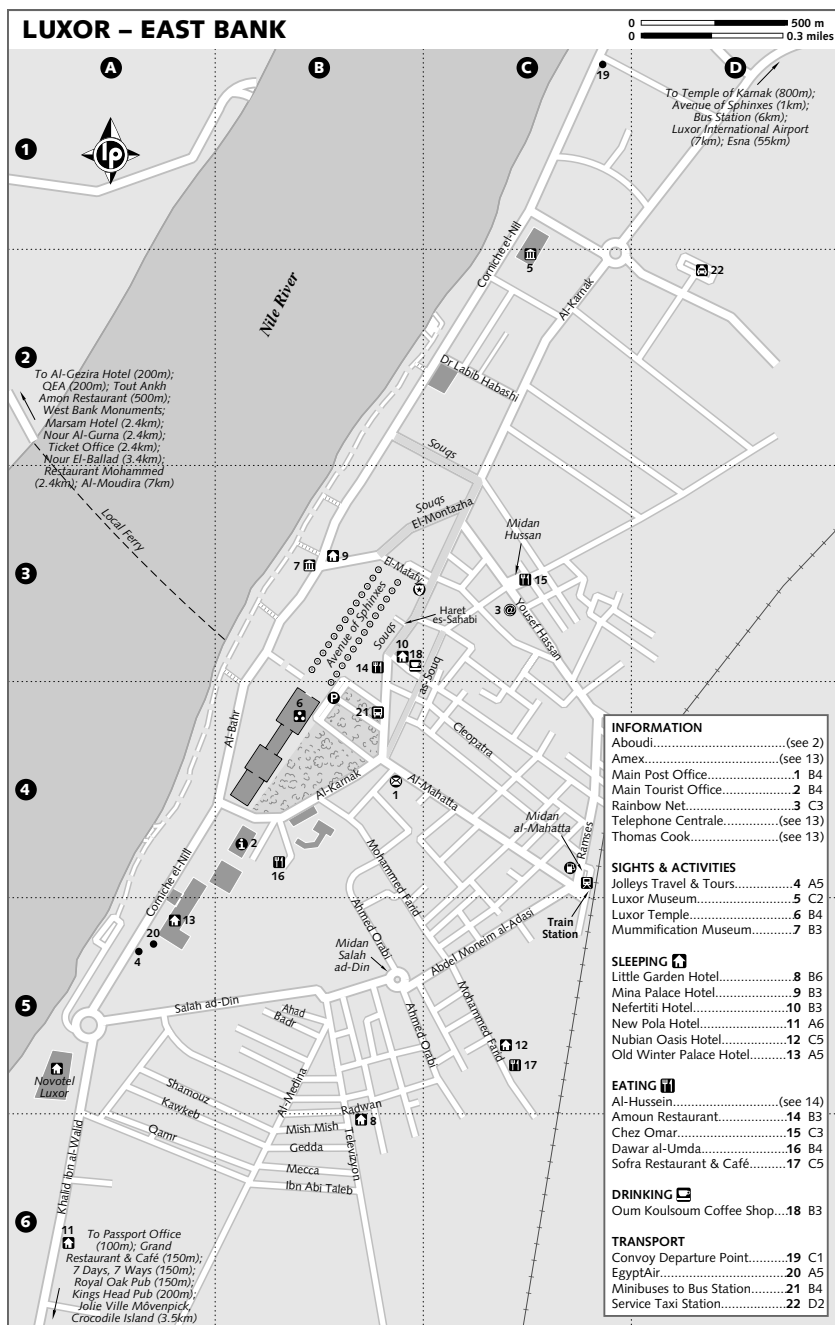
The town centre spills around magnificent **Luxor Temple** (☎ 237 2408; adult/student €€50/25, tripod €€20; ☹ 6am-9pm). Largely built by the New Kingdom Pharaoh Amenhotep III, it was continually added to over the centuries. In the 13th century, the Arabs built a mosque in an interior court.

Of the 730 human-headed, lion-bodied statues lining the **Avenue of Sphinxes** between the temples of Luxor and Karnak, 58 still remain.

Much more than a temple, **Karnak** (☎ 238 0270; adult/student €€60/30; ☹ 6am-5.30pm) is a spectacular complex of sanctuaries, pylons and obelisks. Its crowning glory is the **Great Hypostyle Hall**, constructed around 134 lotus-blossom pillars. Begun in the Middle Kingdom, the complex was added to, dismantled, restored, enlarged and decorated over 1500 years.

If you can tolerate the crowds, lame script and long walk, then the **sound-and-light show** (☎ 237 2241; www.sound-light.egypt.com; adult/student €€55/44) offers a nonetheless atmospheric introduction to Karnak. Check the website or tourist office for the current schedule.

Microbuses between Luxor town and Karnak cost 50pt. A *calèche* costs €€7; a taxi costs €€10 to €€15.



WEST BANK

The West Bank of Luxor was the necropolis of ancient Thebes, a vast city of the dead where magnificent temples were raised to honour the cults of Pharaohs entombed in nearby cliffs, and where queens, nobles, priests and artisans built tombs with spectacular décor.

The first monuments you'll see, 3km west of the ferry crossing, are the 18m-high **Colossi of Memnon**. These statues are all that remain of a temple built by Amenhotep III.

The **main ticket office** (☎ 6am–4pm) is 500m west of the Colossi. Each monument requires a separate ticket. Students pay half price. To help decide which monuments to target, buy the user-friendly *Egypt Pocket Guide* to the area (££30). The valleys of the Kings and Queens have separate ticket offices on site.

Couched in a sun-ravaged ravine of **Al-Qurn** (Horn) escarpment, the celebrated **Valley of the Kings** (☎ 231 1662; for 3 tombs adult/student ££70/35; ☎ 6am–4pm) is the last resting place of the Pharaohs. Many of them weren't allowed much rest, however, as the pillage of tombs began before the last Pharaohs were buried. Only one tomb, the **tomb of Tutankhamen** (adult/student ££100/50), found in 1922 by Howard Carter, has so far been discovered intact. If you've seen Tutankhamen's treasures in the Cairo Museum, a visit to the simple tomb of this minor Pharaoh helps indicate what unimaginable riches once attended the tombs of more illustrious Pharaohs such as Tuthmosis I or Ramses II. The corridors and antechambers of the **tombs of Sethos I** and **Ramses IX** have some of the best wall paintings, while the **tomb of Amenophis II**, hidden in the escarpment, is the most exciting to visit. Many tombs are regrettably closed.

Photography is strictly forbidden and police won't hesitate to confiscate film/memory cards.

If you have water and decent walking shoes, you can hike across the **Theban Hills** from the tomb of Seti I in the Valley of the Kings to Deir al-Bahri. The walk takes 50 minutes and is extremely steep in parts.

Rising out of the desert plain in a series of terraces, the **Funerary Temple of Hatshepsut** (Deir al-Bahri; adult/student ££30/15; ☎ 6am–4.30pm) is a spectacular sight. It was vandalised by Hatshepsut's bitter successor, Tuthmosis III, but retains much of its original magnificence, including elaborate friezes.

The tombs comprising the **Valley of the Queens** (for 3 tombs adult/student ££30/15; ☎ 6am–

4.30pm) contain some exquisite wall painting. Disappointingly, the crowning glory of the site, the **Tomb of Nefertari**, remains closed.

The temple complex of **Medinat Habu** (adult/student ££30/15; ☎ 6am–4.30pm) is dominated by the **Temple of Ramses III**. The largest temple after Karnak, with many colourful reliefs and golden stone that catches fire at sunset, Medinat Habu is a must-see.

A taxi from Luxor town costs ££100 for a three-hour tour. Alternatively, you can hire a bicycle and bring it over on the ferry. From the main ticket office it's 1km to the Valley of the Queens and 5km to the Valley of the Kings.

Activities

For **felucca cruises** (per hr per boat ££50), stand on the corniche and wait for captains to approach.

Horse-riding around West Bank temples is an unforgettable experience, particularly at sunset. The best stables are **Arabian Horse Stables** (☎ 231 0024, 010 504 8558; ☎ 7am–sunset). Horse rides cost ££25 per hour, camels cost ££20 and donkeys ££15.

There are many **alabaster workshops** between the Valley of the Kings and Queens. A hand-hewn pot costs from ££80. Machine-polished onyx is cheaper.

A **balloon ride** above the West Bank costs around ££450. Ask in the Nefertiti Hotel (p114) for details.

Tours

Travel restrictions for foreigners in the Nile Valley make independent travel challenging, so tours outside Luxor are recommended.

Jolleys Travel & Tours (☎ 010 183 8894; ☎ 9am–10pm) Located next to the Old Winter Palace Hotel; has a good reputation for day trips.

Maher Tadres (☎ 012 258 9635; maherhelta@hotmail.com) For a highly recommended, English-speaking taxi-driver and guide. Contact in advance of your visit.

QEA (☎ 231 1667; www.questfortheegyptianadventure.com; Main Rd, Al-Gezira) With a percentage of profits going towards charitable projects in Egypt, this is a worthwhile agency with which you can make advanced bookings.

Sleeping

Many Luxor hotels charge 50% less in summer. For a more tranquil experience, try West Bank hotels.

EAST BANK

Nubian Oasis Hotel (☎ 292 9445; Sharia Mohammed Farid; dm/s/d ££10/10/20, s/d with air-con ££20/35; ☎) Large

KING TUT & HIS BODY PARTS

After 3500 years King Tutankhamen has been reunited with his genitals. When an X-ray in 1968 showed his penis was missing, it was assumed it had been stolen for private collection. A CT scan, however, has recently revealed the missing member in loose sand around the Pharaoh.

breakfasts, bike hire (€6 per day) and free use of kitchen/washing machine make this hotel commendable.

Nefertiti Hotel (☎ 237 2386; www.nefertitihotel.com; btwn Sharia al-Karnak & Sharia as-Souq; s/d €40/60; 🏠) Helpful cousins run this dark but friendly hotel with rooftop views of Luxor Temple. They can organise balloon rides and desert tours.

Mina Palace Hotel (☎ 237 2074; fax 238 2194; Corniche el-Nil; s/d €80/100; 🏠) Cleanish rooms have balconies with great views of the Nile.

Little Garden Hotel (☎ 238 9038; www.littlegardenhotel.com; Sharia Radwan; s/d US\$18/24; 🏠) Great service and a secluded garden compensates for poor location in this recommended midrange choice.

New Pola Hotel (☎ 236 5081; www.newpolahotel.com; Sharia Khalid ibn al-Walid; s/d US\$26/35; 🏠) This excellent-value three-star hotel has a rooftop swimming pool with stunning Nile views.

Jolie Ville Mövenpick (☎ 237 4855; www.moevenpick-hotels.com; Crocodile Island; s/d US\$100/150; 🏠) Located on its own island, this exceptional hotel offers bungalow rooms in magnificent grounds. The infinity pool, among a host of amenities, is magically aligned with the Nile.

Old Winter Palace Hotel (☎ 238 0422; h1661@accor-hotels.com; Corniche el-Nil; r Pavilion Bldg US\$125-375, old wing US\$235-1125; 🏠) Worth a visit in its own right, this colonial landmark on the corniche is set in a semitropical garden and has fine dining, leather-sofa bars and grand Nile-view rooms.

WEST BANK

Marsam Hotel (☎ 237 2403; marsam@africamail.com; Gurna; s/d €65/130, without bathroom €45/90) A favourite with archaeologists, this is an atmospheric but not exactly spotless budget option.

El-Gezira Hotel (☎ 231 0034; www.el-gezira.com; Al-Gezira; s/d €60/80; 🏠) Offering clean rooms for bargain prices, this hotel also has a rooftop restaurant with Nile views.

Nour al-Gurna (☎ 231 1430; nourelgournahotel@yahoo.com; Gurna; s/d €150/200) Opposite the ticket office, this family-run, mudbrick house with painted murals is full of character. It serves delicious home-grown food.

Nour el-Balad (☎ 242 6111; s/d €150/250) This attractive hotel near Medinat Habu is run by the same friendly family as at Nour al-Gurna.

Al-Moudira (☎ 325 1307; moudirahotel@yahoo.com; Daba'iyya; r/ste US\$200/275; 🏠) If you're a soaker, this atmospheric Moorish-style hotel has terracotta-coloured rooms with decadent bathtubs. A 15-minute drive from the ferry in glorious gardens, this is a romantic option with excellent dining.

Eating & Drinking**EAST BANK**

Sandwich stands and other cheap-eat possibilities are found on Sharia al-Mahatta and Sharia Televizyon. Two favourites with travellers are **Amoun Restaurant** (Sharia al-Karnak; mezze €2.50-7, mains €7-19; 🕒 7am-10pm), at the end of the *souq* near Luxor Temple, and neighbouring **Al-Husseini**.

Grand Restaurant & Café (🕒 8am-1am; 🏠) A favourite with tour groups, the Grand has a pleasant terrace for mezze (€5) and *sheesha* (€5). It's located just off Sharia Khalid ibn al-Walid.

Chez Omar (☎ 236 7678; Midan Hassan; mains €15; 🕒 24hr) This is a lively place to try pigeon and other Egyptian dishes.

7 Days, 7 Ways (Sharia Khalid ibn al-Walid; 🏠) With roast beef and Yorkshire pudding (€29.50, Sunday only), this restaurant is not surprisingly a British favourite.

Dawar al-Umda (☎ 238 0721; Sharia al-Karnak) A top-end dining option: a *Thousand and One Nights*-style garden restaurant at the Mercure Inn. It hosts popular Oriental buffets (€€85) on Thursday evenings, featuring performances by Sufi and belly dancers.

Sofra Restaurant & Café (☎ 235 9752; 90 Sharia Farid St; mains €€145) For a highly recommended dining experience. The café serves traditional Egyptian dishes in intimate, home-style dining rooms.

Oum Kouloum Coffee Shop (sheesha & coffee €€4) Next to the Nefertiti Hotel, this is the most popular *ahwa* in town.

The **Royal Oak Pub** (Sharia Khalid ibn al-Walid; 🕒 4pm-2am) and the **Kings Head Pub** (Sharia Khalid ibn al-Walid; 🕒 10am-2am) are British-style watering-holes.

WEST BANK

Restaurant Mohammed (☎ 231 1014; Gurna; meals €€8-20; 🕒 24hr) This eccentric but recommended restaurant is set in the peaceful courtyard of Mohammed Abdel Lahi's mudbrick house, near the ticket office. Mohammed's mother cooks delicious *kofta tagen* (spiced mince meat served in an earthenware pot; €€20), served with home-grown salad leaves.

Tout Ankh Amon Restaurant (☎ 231 0118; fixed menu €€35) With rooftop views of the Nile, and a pergola of grapes, this is a good place to try traditional meat dishes cooked in clay pots. To get here, turn left after disembarking from the ferry from the East Bank and walk for 300m along the west bank of the Nile. The restaurant has a signboard, although the outdoor staircase doesn't look too inviting.

Getting There & Away**AIR**

The **EgyptAir office** (☎ 238 0580; Corniche el-Nil; 🕒 8am-8pm) is next to Amex. There are regular connections with Cairo (€€714, one hour and five minutes) and Aswan (€€360, 40 minutes), and thrice-weekly flights to Sharm el-Sheikh (€€537, one hour and five minutes).

BOAT

During the high season (October to May), an armada of cruise boats travels the Nile between Esna (for Luxor) and Aswan, stopping at Edfu and Kom Ombo en route. They cost from US\$50 per night for full board and can be arranged through any travel agent.

BUS

Minibuses to the **bus station** (Sharia al-Karnak) cost €€5 and leave from the Horus Hotel near Luxor Temple; taxis cost €€25. Bus services include Cairo (€€85, 11 hours, two daily), Hurghada (€€30, five hours, eight daily), Port Said (€€70), Dahab (€€110, 16 hours), Sharm el-Sheikh (€€100, 15 hours) and Al-Kharga (€€40, four hours, four weekly). For Aswan, it's better to take the train.

CONVOY

It's currently compulsory for foreigners to travel from Luxor by convoy. There are numerous checkpoints, making travel outside the convoys impossible. You can drive independently to the Western Desert, but with police escorts that often insist on accompany-

ing you to Al-Kharga. Check current convoy timings with the tourist office.

SERVICE TAXI

The service taxi station is off Sharia al-Karnak. Because of police restrictions you'll have to take an entire car and go in convoy, costing about €€300 for Hurghada and €€200 for Aswan.

TRAIN

Luxor's **train station** (Midan al-Mahatta) is conveniently located in the centre of town. **Abela Egypt Sleeping Train** (☎ 237 2015; www.sleepingtrains.com) services leave at 8.30pm and 9.30pm daily, arriving in Cairo at 5.45am and 6.45am the next morning. The trip costs US\$53/74 per person one way in a double/single cabin. Tickets must be paid for in US dollars or euros. The price includes breakfast.

Foreigners can take train 981, 1903 and 997 (€€67/45 in 1st/2nd class), departing at 9.15am, 9.15pm and 11.10pm. The trip takes approximately 10 hours. Train 981 to Cairo stops near Abydos, Asyut and Minya but tourist police insist on an armed escort for foreigners who alight here.

Foreigners can take three daily services to Aswan (€€30/21 in 1st/2nd class), leaving at 7.15am, 9.30am and 5pm. The trip takes three hours. All three trains stop at Edfu (€€19/15, 1½ hours) and Kom Ombo (€€25/18, 2½ hours).

There's a train from Luxor to Al-Kharga every Thursday (€€11/10.25 in 2nd/3rd class, seven hours) at 6am or 7am, depending on the time of year.

Getting Around

A taxi from **Luxor International Airport** (☎ 237 4655), 7km east of town, costs around €€25 to East Bank destinations and €€50 to West Bank destinations. There are no buses between the airport and town.

For about €€20 per hour you can get around town by horse-drawn *calèche* but bargain hard.

Regular *baladi* (municipal) ferries carry passengers between the East and West Banks. You'll find the East Bank stop in front of Luxor Temple, and the West Bank stop in front of the dusty car park where the pickups congregate. A ticket costs €€1 each way. Private launches charge €€5 each way for the same trip.

Consider hiring a bike (£6 per day) from the unmarked bike-hire place next to the Nour Al-Gurna Hotel; it's one of the best ways to get to the sights.

SOUTH OF LUXOR

Edfu

The attraction in this town is the **Temple of Horus** (adult/student £50/25; ☎ 6am-4pm), the most completely preserved temple in Egypt. Built by the Ptolemies over a period of 200 years, it was dedicated to the falcon-headed son of Osiris.

Trains running between Luxor and Aswan stop here (see p115 and p118); the station is approximately 4km from the temple and taxis to the site cost £10. Most cruise boats stop here and a *calèche* from the waterfront costs around £20.

Kom Ombo

Spectacularly perched on the Nile near the village of Kom Ombo, the **Temple of Sobek & Haroeris** (adult/student £30/15; ☎ 6am-4pm) is dedicated to the crocodile god and falcon-headed sky god respectively. In ancient times sacred crocodiles basked themselves in the sun along the river bank here; these days, crocodiles are unable to swim past the High Dam at Aswan.

If you're travelling from Luxor you can stop here on the train (p118) and take a taxi to the site (£10). A return taxi from Luxor to Edfu and Kom Ombo costs £225 to £250. Cruise boats moor alongside the temple steps.

ASWAN

☎ 097 / pop 241,000

Egypt's southernmost city sits on the banks of a particularly beautiful stretch of the Nile, decorated with palm-fringed islands and flotillas of white-sailed feluccas. Associated with the Nubian people, a distinct ethnic group with their own language and customs, the town is more African in character than the cities of the north.

Orientation

The bus and train stations are at the northern end of town. The lively *souq* (Sharia as-Souq) runs parallel to the corniche. Banks, restaurants and shops are located on the corniche, which ends at the imposing Coptic cathedral, the Nubia Museum and the city's better hotels.

Information

The main banks have branches on the corniche; there are ATMs at Banque Misr, Banque du Caire and the National Bank of Egypt.

Amex (☎ 230 6983; Corniche el-Nil; ☎ 9am-5pm) Cashes travellers cheques.

Aswan Internet Café (☎ 231 4472; Corniche el-Nil; per hr £10; ☎ 9am-midnight)

Aswanet (☎ 231 7332; Keylany Hotel, Sharia Keylany; per hr £10; ☎ 9am-1am) Internet access.

Main post office (Corniche el-Nil; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu) Next to the Rowing Club.

Main tourist office (☎ 231 2811; Midan al-Mahatta; ☎ 8am-3pm & 6-8pm) Next to the train station.

Passport office (1st fl, Police Bldg, Corniche el-Nil; ☎ 8.30am-1pm Sat-Thu) Visa extensions are available here.

Telephone centre (Corniche el-Nil; ☎ 24hr) Just past the EgyptAir office.

Thomas Cook (☎ 304 011; Corniche el-Nil; ☎ 8am-2pm & 5-9pm) Cashes travellers cheques.

Sights

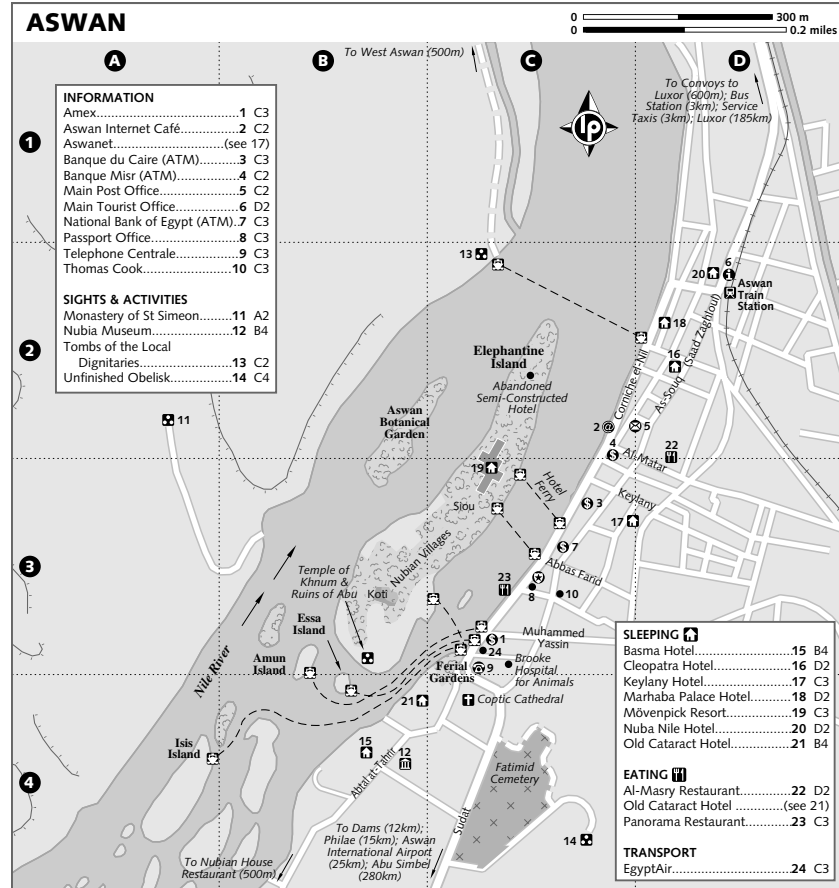
You don't have to be in Aswan long to recognise local ethnic pride. Justice is given to the history, art and culture of the local people in the excellent **Nubia Museum** (Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; adult/student £50/25; ☎ 9am-1pm & 5-9pm). The 'Nubia Submerged' exhibition, which includes photographs of Philae and Abu Simbel before they were re-sited, tells the story of how the Nubian homeland was submerged by the building of Lake Nasser. The entrance is opposite the Basma Hotel, a 15-minute walk from the town centre.

The **unfinished obelisk** (adult/student £30/15; ☎ 7am-5pm) lies in the granite quarries that supplied the stone for pyramids and temples. Three sides of the shaft, which is nearly 42m long, were excavated before it was discarded due to a flaw in the granite. Taxis charge £5 from the centre of town.

From Aswan, felucca trips (£25 per hour) can be organised to Kitchener Island's verdant **botanical garden** (admission £10; ☎ 8am-5pm) and the 6th-century Coptic **Monastery of St Simeon** (adult/student £20/10; ☎ 7am-4pm winter). To reach the monastery, take a camel from the dock (££40). You can also get a boat to Old and Middle Kingdom **tombs** (adult/student £20/10; ☎ 8am-4pm) of local dignitaries on the West Bank.

Tours

Travel restrictions for foreigners in the Nile Valley make independent travel challenging, so consider taking a tour.



One highly recommended and energetic local tour operator is **Montasser Mohammed** (☎ 012 335 9105; montasser200@yahoo.com). He can arrange just about anything to anywhere for individual travellers.

Sleeping

Keylany Hotel (☎ /fax 231 7332; www.keylanyhotel.com; Sharia Keylany; s/d ££50/70; ☎) The best budget option in town, with professional staff and delicious breakfasts.

Nuba Nile Hotel (☎ 231 3267; hamdi_aged@hotmail.com; s/d ££50/70; ☎) This comfortable, local-flavour hotel is a short walk from the train station.

Cleopatra Hotel (☎ 231 4001; fax 231 4002; Sharia as-Souq; s/d US\$32/45; ☎) One of Aswan's

few midrange hotels, the Cleopatra has a small rooftop pool.

Marhaba Palace Hotel (☎ 233 0102; marhabaaswan@yahoo.com; Corniche el-Nil; s/d US\$50/60; ☎) This recommended bright and friendly hotel has rooftop views of the Nile.

Basma Hotel (☎ 231 0901; basma@rocketmail.com; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; s/d US\$108/141; ☎) Opposite the Nubia Museum, the Basma is modern, efficient and has attractive gardens. Breakfast costs £27.

Mövenpick Resort (☎ 230 3455; www.movenpick-aswan.com; s/d US\$183/236; ☎) This splendid resort on Elephantine Island is the perfect place to relax and enjoy kingfishers and hoopoes from your balcony. There's a free 24-hour ferry to the corniche.

Old Cataract Hotel (☎ 231 6000; www.sofitel.com; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; r US\$168-1500; 🍷 🍴) It's not difficult to imagine Agatha Christie penning *Death on the Nile* from her riverside balcony in this grand old dame of a hotel. Don't even think of turning up for supper in the Moorish-style restaurants without a reservation: ad hoc callers are unwelcome.

Eating & Drinking

The most popular snack stand in town is next to Aswan Coffee Shop. It's opposite a public oven and uses freshly baked bread for *ta'amiyya* sandwiches.

Nubian House Restaurant (☎ 232 6226; mezze E£4-5, mains E£7-20) Serving authentic Nubian dishes, this restaurant has stunning sunset views of the First cataract.

Panorama Restaurant (☎ 231 6108; Corniche el-Nil; mains E£8-15) Try the delicious fish *tagen* (E£15) and enjoy the view of Elephantine Island from this recommended Nile-side restaurant.

Al-Masry Restaurant (☎ 230 2576; Sharia al-Matar; meals around E£25) A local institution, Al-Masry produces tasty kebabs and *kofta*, served with bread, salad and tahini.

Old Cataract Hotel (Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; 🍷 8am-11pm) Enjoying tea or an apéritif on the Nile-side terrace at the Old Cataract is on many a traveller's 'must-do' list. The hotel discourages an inundation of tourists by charging E£80 per person for this privilege, which goes only partially towards the price of afternoon tea (E£43 to E£55). The remainder, we suppose, can be put down to experience.

The cafés on the busy corner of Midan al-Mahatta and Sharia as-Souq are great places to linger over honey-drenched baklava and tea.

Getting There & Away

AIR

EgyptAir (☎ 231 5000; Corniche el-Nil; 🍷 8am-8pm) has six flights to Cairo (E£1037, 1¼ hours) and a daily flight to Luxor (E£364, 30 minutes).

BOAT

See p124 for details of the weekly ferry to Sudan via Wadi Halfa.

Aswan is the best place to arrange overnight felucca trips because even if the winds fail, the Nile's strong currents propel boats north. The most popular trips are to Kom Ombo (one night, two days; E£31.50 per person) or Edfu (two nights, three days; E£56.50). Boats sleep six and passengers pay an extra E£5 per

'GOING TO SUDAN – WHAT, TODAY?'

If you're planning on crossing the Sudanese border to Wadi Halfa, make sure you're not in a hurry. Michael Palin describes the experience in his famous Pole to Pole adventure. You can read about his 'Day 62', tolerance-testing, sofa-riding border exploits on the web at: www.palinstravels.co.uk/book.

person for a permit, plus the cost of food and drink supplies.

You could also try a three-night cruise on one of the superbly luxurious boats that slide along the Nile towards Esna, near Luxor. They cost E£50 per night full board and leave from the corniche; trips can be arranged by any travel agent or hotel.

BUS

Bus services include Cairo (E£85, 13 hours), Luxor (E£15, four to five hours, six daily) and Hurghada (E£45, seven hours).

CONVOY

It is compulsory for foreigners to travel between Luxor and Aswan by convoy. Check current convoy timings with the tourist office.

SERVICE TAXI

A taxi to Luxor costs about E£250 if you stop at Kom Ombo, Edfu and Esna en route.

TRAIN

Abela Egypt Sleeping Train (☎ 230 2124; www.sleepingtrains.com) services leave at 5pm and 6.30pm, arriving in Cairo at 5.45am and 6.45am the next morning. The first service travels on to Alexandria. Tickets cost US\$53/74 per person one way in a double/single cabin. Tickets must be paid for in US dollars or euros. The price includes a basic dinner and breakfast.

Air-conditioned tourist trains to Cairo (E£43/E£81 in 1st/2nd class, 13 hours) via Luxor (E£30/E£21 in 1st/2nd class, three hours) leave at 6am, 6pm and 8pm. All three of these trains stop at Kom Ombo (E£15/12 in 1st/2nd class, 45 minutes) and Edfu (E£19/10, 1¼ hours).

GETTING AROUND

Service taxis from the **Aswan International Airport** (☎ 248 0333) to the town centre cost E£1. A private taxi should be no more than E£25.

You can get around Aswan by *calèche* (E£10 per hour). A 3½-hour taxi tour to the Temple of Philae, High Dam and Unfinished Obelisk costs around E£30. A taxi anywhere within town (including from the town centre to the bus station) costs E£5.

AROUND ASWAN High Dam

The original dam across the Nile was built by the British at the beginning of the 20th century; however, it was insufficient to keep the Nile in check during the annual spate. The Egyptian government was assisted by various nations in building a new dam in the 1960s. It was opened with due pomp and ceremony in 1971 and came to be seen as a symbol of Egypt's independence in the modern world. As the full environmental impact of the dam began to be understood, however, it became source of controversy, not least on account of the disruption it caused to the Nubian communities swallowed up by the creation of Lake Nasser.

To reach the High Dam, taxis cost E£40 (round trip).

Philae (Aglikia Island)

Built by the Ptolemies and Romans and relocated to a different island after the building of the High Dam in the 1960s, the **Temple of Philae** (adult/student E£50/25; 🍷 7am-4pm) is a romantic sight. It was dedicated to Isis, who found the heart of her slain brother, Osiris, on Philae Island. Early Christians later turned the hypostyle hall into a chapel.

To reach Philae, taxis cost E£40 for the round trip and the boat costs E£35.

HIGH DAM FACTS

- Old Dam built by British in 1902
- High Dam completed in 1971
- 2.3 million stones in Cheop's Pyramid
- 40 million stones in High Dam
- Third-largest dam in the world
- Lake Nasser is second-largest man-made lake in the world
- Plus points: provides protection from flooding
- Minus points: enormous environmental impact

A nightly **sound-and-light show** (☎ 230 5376; admission E£55), lasting 1½ hours, is held at the temple.

Abu Simbel

☎ 097

Perhaps the most striking temple in Egypt, the magnificent **Great Temple of Abu Simbel** (☎ 400 325; adult/student E£70/35; 🍷 5am-5pm) was cut from the hillside to honour the gods Ra-Harakhty, Amun, Ptah and the deified Pharaoh Ramses II. Discovered by Burkhart in 1813, protruding from the interring desert sands, the four famous colossal statues of Ramses II sit majestically facing east. Each statue is over 20m tall and flanked by smaller statues of the Pharaoh's mother and his beloved wife, Nefertari.

The neighbouring **Temple of Hathor** is guarded by six further standing statues of Ramses and Nefertari. In the 1960s both temples were winched to higher ground to avoid the rising waters of **Lake Nasser** in an ingenious feat of engineering.

Don't miss the spectacular **sound-and-light show** (admission E£60); with a succinct script and inventive imagery, it's the best in Egypt. With the waters of Lake Nasser quietly lapping the shore behind, a canopy of stars presiding overhead, and the repeated forms of Ramses teased into life by the caresses of superimposed images in front, this is one show that could best be described as 'in the round'. Particularly effective are the sequences of hieroglyphic warriors and musicians that float across the surface of the burnished statues, reinventing the forms for a postmodern sensibility without damaging or diminishing the original. As such, the show is more than a piece of historical explication, it is an 'art experience' – or a piece of magic, if you prefer.

There are banks in town, but no ATMs. **Abu Simbel Village** (Hotel Abbas; ☎ /fax 400 092, ☎ 012 363 9794; r E£110; 🍷) is the cheapest accommodation option in town. Attached to a cultural centre, the mudbrick **Eskaleh** (☎ 012 368 0521; fikrykachif@genevalink.com; s €30-35, d €40-50; 🍷) features comfortable accommodation, and regular performances of Nubian music and dance. Meals (breakfast/lunch/dinner E£15/30/40) feature organic, home-grown vegetables. Despite catering largely for top-end tour groups, **Nefertari Hotel** (☎ 683 1677; www.nefertarihotelabusimbel.com; s/d US\$100/120) manages a peaceful atmosphere with great views

overlooking Lake Nasser. The monuments are a five-minute walk away.

You can eat at the Seti Abu Simbel or at a clutch of ramshackle restaurants, including *ta'amiyya* and *shwarma* (sliced minced meat shaved from a rotating skewer of meat, wrapped in Arabic bread with salad garnish) stands, on the main street.

Most tourists travel to Abu Simbel on a coach tour (E€60 to E€100) in one of the two daily convoys from Aswan. These currently leave at 4am and 11am, take 3½ hours and allow two hours before returning. You can also get there by hiring a taxi (E€150) for 24 hours, allowing you to enjoy sunset on Lake Nasser and the recommended sound-and-light show.

EgyptAir has two daily flights from Aswan to Abu Simbel (E€640 return), leaving at 6.30am and 9am. You can also go by boat from the High Dam, across Lake Nasser. Ask any travel agent for details.

EGYPT DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

There are many budget hotels in Egypt, including beachside camps in Sinai. Midrange hotels are harder to find but top-end accommodation abounds, with world-class hotels charging less than international prices.

Prices in this chapter are for high-season rooms and include tax, breakfast and private bathroom unless indicated otherwise. Budget hotels are defined as those charging up to E€100 (US\$17), midrange between E€100 and E€580 (US\$17 to US\$100) and top end as more than E€580 (US\$100) for a double room. In the low season, significant discounts are offered.

Not all hotels in Egypt accept credit card payments.

ACTIVITIES

For those with monument fatigue, non-archaeological pursuits include desert safaris in the Sinai and Western Desert and world-class diving and snorkelling in the Sinai and Red Sea area.

BUSINESS HOURS

The official weekend is Friday and Saturday. Note that during Ramadan, all banks, offices, shops, museums and tourist sites keep shorter

hours. Note also that all tourist sites are officially open an hour later in summer months: in reality, it's rather more ad hoc.

Banks & government offices 8.30am to 1.30pm Sunday to Thursday.

Post offices 8.30am to 2pm Saturday to Thursday.

Private offices 10am to 2pm and 4pm to 9pm, except Friday.

Restaurants & cafés Noon to midnight daily.

Shops 9am to 2pm and 5pm to 10pm summer, 10am to 7pm winter; some close on Sundays.

CUSTOMS

Visitors may import duty-free 1L of alcohol and 400 cigarettes. Currency, cameras, sports equipment; electronic devices and jewellery are meant to be declared on entry. Note that you can't take Egyptian pounds out of the country.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

All travel in Upper Egypt between Aswan and Cairo, and in many parts of the Sinai, is restricted. This means that although you can hire a car, for example, you are obliged for much of your journey to have armed policemen accompany you, either as passengers or as an escort – or both. Although the purpose of these measures is to protect the tourist, it's hard not to find the experience obtrusive and dispiriting.

A further annoyance is the constant badgering to buy souvenirs or guiding services at the main tourist destinations; the aggressive nature of this solicitation can mar the

PRACTICALITIES

- Local news/information in English: *Egyptian Gazette* (50pt); *Al-Ahram Weekly* (www.ahram.org.eg/weekly; E€1) appears every Thursday with good what's-on listings
- English Broadcasts: BBC World Service (www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice), FM95 (557kHz) and Nile FM (104.2kHz)
- TV News: CNN and BBC World in hotels
- Electrical current: 220V AC, 50Hz (except Alexandria and parts of Cairo: 110V AC, 50Hz)
- Sockets: round, two-pin, European-type
- Measurements: metric

pleasure of Egypt's monuments if you're not prepared for it. You should also be on the alert for scams such as con men posing as guides or archaeologists.

In the Sinai, beware of wandering off the beaten track: unexploded ordinance still litters parts of the desert.

DISCOUNT CARDS

Discounts to museums and sites are available for students with an International Student Identity Card (ISIC). With proof of status, you can obtain one of these in Cairo from **ESTS** (Map pp88-9; ☎ 02-531 0330; www.estsegypt.com; 23 Sharia Manial, Midan el-Mammalek, El-Roda). Avoid buying bogus cards, or discounts for bone fide students may be jeopardised.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES Egyptian Embassies & Consulates

There is a list of Egyptian diplomatic and consular missions at www.mfa.gov.eg.

Australia Canberra (☎ 02-6273 4437/8; fax 02-6273 4279; 1 Darwin Ave, Yarralumla 2600, ACT); Melbourne (☎ 03-9654 8869, 03-9654 8634; consenged@primus.com.au; 9th fl, 124 Exhibition St, Melbourne 3000, Vic); Sydney (☎ 02-9281 4844; www.egypt.org.au; 3rd fl, 241 Commonwealth St, Surry Hills 2010, NSW)

Canada Montreal (☎ 514-866 8455; www.egyptianconsulatemontreal.org; 1 PISainte Marie, 2617 Montreal, Quebec H3B 4S3); Ottawa (☎ 613-234 4931-5; egyptemb@sympatico.ca; 454 Laurier Ave E, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6R3)

Eritrea (☎ 123294; fax 123295; 5 Deff Awfworki St, Asmara)

Ethiopia (☎ 550021; fax 552722; Sidist Kilo, Woreda 11.K.17, Addis Ababa)

France Marseilles (☎ 04 91 25 04 04; 166 Ave d'Hambourg, 13008); Paris (☎ 01 53 67 88 30/2; www.ambassade-egypte.com; 56 Ave d'Iena, 75116)

Germany Berlin (☎ 30-477 54 70; www.egyptian-embassy.de; Stauffenberg Str 6-7, 10785); Frankfurt-am-Main (☎ 69-955 13 40/1; Eysenckstrasse 34, 60322)

Israel Eilat (☎ 08-637 6882; 68 Ha Afroni St); Tel Aviv (☎ 03-546 4151; fax 03-544 1615; 54 Basel St, 64239)

Jordan Amman (☎ 06-560 5175; egypt@embegyptjordan.com; 22 Qurtubah St, Amman) Aqaba (☎ 03-201 6171; cnr Al-Istiqal & Al-Akhatal Sts)

Libya (☎ 222 3099; fax 223 2523; El-Awarsi St, Western Fuwaihat, Tripoli)

Netherlands (☎ 70-354 45 35; ambegnl@wanadoo.nl; Badhuisweg 92, 2587 CL, The Hague)

New Zealand Apply via the Australian embassy.

Sudan (☎ 183 777646; sphinx-egysud@yahoo.com; University St, Al-Mogran, Khartoum)

UK Lowndes St, London (☎ 020-7235 9777; 2 Lowndes St, SW1); South St, London (☎ 020-7499 2401; www.egyptianconsulate.co.uk; 26 South St, Mayfair W1)

USA Chicago (☎ 312-828 9162-4; Suite 1900, 500 N Michigan Ave, IL 60611); Houston (☎ 713-961 4915/6; Suite 2180, 1990 Post Oak Blvd, TX 77056); New York City (☎ 212-759 7120-2; 1110 2nd Ave, NY 10022); San Francisco (☎ 415-346 9700/2; 3001 Pacific Ave, CA 94115); Washington, DC (☎ 202-895 5400; www.embassyofegyptwashingtondc.org; 3521 International Court NW, Washington, DC, 20008)

Embassies & Consulates in Egypt

Most foreign embassies and consulates open from 8am to 2pm Sunday to Thursday.

Australia (Map pp88-9; ☎ 02-575 0444; fax 02-578 1638; 11th fl, World Trade Centre, 1191 Corniche el-Nil, Bulaq)

Canada (Map pp88-9; ☎ 02-794 3110; fax 02-796 3548; 26 Sharia Kamal el-Shenawy, Garden City)

Eritrea (Map pp88-9; ☎ 02-303 3503; eritembe@yahoo.com; 6 El Fallah St, Mohandessine)

Ethiopia (Map pp88-9; ☎ 02-335 3693; ethio@ethioembassy.org.eg; El Mesaha Sq Villa 11, Doqqi)

France (Map pp88-9; ☎ 02-570 3916; fax 02-571 0276; 29 Sharia al-Giza, Giza)

Germany (Map pp88-9; ☎ 02-735 3687; fax 02-736 0530; 8 Hassan Sabry, Zamalek)

Israel (Map pp88-9; ☎ 02-761 0545; fax 761 0414; 6 Sharia ibn Malek, Giza)

Jordan (Map pp88-9; ☎ 02-748 5566; fax 02-760 1027; Al-Shaheed Basem al-Khatib, Doqqi)

Libya (Map pp88-9; ☎ 02-735 1269; fax 02-735 0072; 7 Sharia el-Saleh Ayoub, Zamalek)

Netherlands (Map pp88-9; ☎ 02-739 5500; fax 02-735 5959; 18 Hassan Sabry, Zamalek)

New Zealand (Map pp92-3; ☎ 02-574 9360; emeco@attmail.com; 4th fl, 2 Sharia Talaat Harb, Downtown)

Sudan (Map pp88-9; ☎ 02-794 9661; fax 02-354 2693; 3 Sharia al-Ibrahimy, Garden City)

UK (Map pp88-9; ☎ 02-794 0852; 7 Sharia Ahmed Ragheb, Garden City)

USA (Map pp92-3; ☎ 02-797 3300; fax 02-797 3200; 8 Sharia Kamal el-Din Salah, Garden City)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Surprisingly, there aren't many headline events on the national cultural calendar. These are the most notable:

Cairo International Book Fair January/February.

Egyptian Marathon (egyptianmarathon@egypt.net) In February, when competitors race around the monuments on Luxor's West Bank.

Ascension of Ramses II At Abu Simbel on 22 February and 22 October each year, when the sun penetrates the inner temple.

FOOD

From kebabs and pizzas to noodles and roast beef, there is a wide variety of food available, though there's limited choice for vegetarian travellers. See p86 for a description of national dishes.

It is advisable to stick to bottled water (check the seal as rogue traders fill up bottles from the tap).

HOLIDAYS

In addition to the main Islamic holidays (p1106) and moveable Coptic Christian holidays, Egypt celebrates the following:

New Year's Day 1 January

Unity Day 10 February

Sinai Day 25 April

May Day 1 May

Liberation Day 18 June

Revolution Day 23 July

Armed Forces Day 6 October

Suez Day 24 October

Victory Day 23 December

INTERNET ACCESS

Access to the internet is widely available throughout Egypt. In this chapter, selected internet cafés are listed in each town.

MAPS

Excellent site maps of all the major monument areas are provided in Alberto Siliotti's informative booklets in the *Egypt Pocket Guide* series (££30 each), published by the American University in Cairo Press. The *Bartholomew World Educational Map of Egypt* (££60) is user-friendly. See p87 for recommended maps of Cairo.

MONEY

The official currency is the Egyptian pound (££; in Arabic, a *guinay*). One pound consists of 100 piastres (pt). Collect plenty of ££1 and ££5 notes for baksheesh.

Money can be changed at commercial banks, foreign exchange bureaus and some hotels. Rates don't vary much. Travellers cheques can be cashed at banks, Amex and Thomas Cook offices.

ATMs are found in major towns throughout Egypt, though they are less common in the Western Desert. In general, those belonging to Banque Misr, Banque du Caire, the National Bank of Egypt and HSBC accept Visa and MasterCard for cash advances.

Although now widely accepted throughout Egypt, credit cards still aren't accepted in budget hotels and restaurants, nor in remote areas such as the Western Oases.

Bargaining, for everything from hotel rooms to clothes, is part of life in Egypt. Tipping, called baksheesh, is indispensable and is relied upon to supplement low salaries. In hotels and restaurants, taxes of up to 25% are added to the bill and a further 15% should be given to the waiter. A guard who shows you something at an archaeological site expects a pound or two. Asking for directions is about the only service that is baksheesh-exempt.

POST

Postcards cost ££1.15 to post and take five days to get to Europe and a week to 10 days to the USA and Australia. Letters of 20g cost between ££1.60 and ££2.20 (depending on destination) and 1kg parcels cost between ££65.40 and ££88.40 to send surface mail. Blue post boxes are for international airmail.

SHOPPING

Egypt has a long lineage in arts and crafts, as a glimpse of Tutankhamen's treasure amply shows. Hand-made beadwork from Sinai, basketry from the Western Oases, glass from Alexandria and alabaster pots from Luxor form part of that ancient tradition. See the shopping section (p96) for details of specific crafts in the capital area.

TELEPHONE & FAX

Calls can be booked at telephone offices, known as centrales, in main cities. Alternatively, card phones for direct-dial international calls are widely available; telephone cards (££10, ££15, ££20 and ££30) can be bought at shops and kiosks. Off-peak is from 8pm to 8am Sunday to Thursday, and all day Friday and Saturday.

Egypt's mobile-phone network runs on the GSM system. There are two mobile-phone companies operating in Egypt: **MobiNil** (☎ in Cairo 02-760 9090; www.mobinil.com) and **Vodafone** (☎ in Cairo 02-529 2000; www.vodafone.com.eg, www.mobileconnect.vodafone.com). Both sell widely available prepaid cards. Mobile-phone numbers begin with an 010 or 012 prefix.

Fax services are available at the main centrales in the big cities. A one-page fax costs ££7.65.

TIME

Egyptian time is two hours ahead of GMT.

TOURIST INFORMATION

There are tourist offices throughout Egypt; all provide free maps and brochures. The office in Cairo is notoriously sluggish but in most other big cities staff are immensely helpful.

VISAS

Visas at the airport (US\$15 or €15) are available for nationals of all western European countries, UK, USA, Australia, all Arab countries, New Zealand, Japan and Korea. Nationals from other countries must obtain visas in their countries of residence.

If you are travelling overland you can get a visa at the port in Aqaba, Jordan, before getting the ferry to Nuweiba. If you are coming from Israel, you *cannot* get a visa at the border; you must apply for one from the embassy in Tel Aviv or the consulate in Eilat.

A single-entry visa is valid for a stay of one month and is valid for three months from the time it is issued.

Free entry stamps allowing 15-day visits to Sinai (between Taba and Sharm el-Sheikh, including St Katherine's Monastery but not Ras Mohammed National Park) are issued at Taba, Nuweiba (port), St Katherine's (airport) and Sharm el-Sheikh (airport or port).

Military permits, issued by either the Ministry of the Interior or the border police, are needed to travel in the Eastern Desert south of Shams Allam, on or around Lake Nasser, off-road in the Western Desert, or between the oases of Bahariyya and Siwa. These can be obtained through a safari company or travel agency at least a fortnight in advance.

Visa Extensions & Re-entry Visas

In Cairo, all visa business is carried out at the monolithic, Egypto-Stalinist **Mogamma** (Map pp92-3; Midan Tahrir, Downtown; ☎ 8am-1.30pm Sat-Wed). Collect and submit a form (window 12 on the 1st floor) with stamps (from window 43), one photograph and photocopies (both available on ground floor) of the photo and visa pages of your passport. The visa extension is processed overnight and available for collection from 9am the next day.

In other cities, extensions of tourist visas (from ££11) are easily obtained at passport offices. Bring one photograph and photocopies of the photo and visa pages of your passport.

You have 14 days to apply for an extension after your visa has expired. Thereafter there's a fine of ££100 and you'll need a letter of apology from your embassy.

Visas for Onward Travel

See the Embassies & Consulates section (p121) for contact details.

Eritrea Visas cost US\$30 and are usually issued the same day.

Ethiopia Bring two photos and a return air ticket. One-month visas cost US\$69, and are usually issued within 24 hours.

Jordan Visas cost nothing for Australians, US\$20 for UK and US citizens, and are usually issued the same day. Bring one photo.

Libya Visas for independent travel to Libya are not being granted at present.

Sudan Visas take from 24 hours to a month to issue and cost US\$85 for one month; you need a letter of invitation and three photos.

VOLUNTEERING

For voluntary activity in Egypt, contact the **Near East Foundation** (www.neareast.org/main/Egypt), which covers wide-ranging projects including bridge-building, establishing veterinary units, and tutoring classes. Alternatively, try **Volunteers for Peace** (www.vfp.org); with no religious or political affiliation, its agenda focuses on fostering peaceful international relations.

Incidentally, if you have no specialist training, you are unlikely to find voluntary work on archaeological digs.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Hassling is more or less constant in Egypt though assault is rare. To avoid problems, dress conservatively (ie no shorts or bare shoulders except in beach resorts).

A couple of useful Arabic phrases are: *la tilmasni* (don't touch me) and *ihtrim naf-sak* (behave yourself). Swearing at would-be Romeos only makes matters worse.

TRANSPORT IN EGYPT

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Most air travellers enter Egypt through Cairo, Alexandria or Sharm el-Sheikh.

Egypt's international and national carrier is **EgyptAir** (☎ 0900 70000; ☎ 8am-8pm), which is neither good nor cheap.

DEPARTURE TAX

Departure tax is included in each international air ticket. Departure tax at land borders costs £E2 (Sinai-only visas are exempt).

Air tickets bought in Egypt are subject to hefty government taxes, which make them extremely expensive. It is better to fly in on a return or onward ticket to other parts of Africa.

Land

Egypt has land borders with Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Libya and Sudan. The land border with Sudan, however, is closed and the only way to travel between Egypt and Sudan is to fly or take the Wadi Halfa ferry (p211).

It's worth noting that almost all international bus and ferry tickets must be paid for in US dollars.

ISRAEL & THE PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

The Taba border with Israel is open 24 hours. Taxis or buses to Eilat (4km from the border) are available on the Israeli side, with frequent connections to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. The Rafah border is currently closed to foreigners.

Coming from Israel to Egypt, you must have a visa in advance unless your visit is limited to eastern Sinai (see p123) or you have prearranged your entry with an Egyptian tour operator. There is an entry tax of £E30 payable at a booth about 1km south of the border on the main road.

Vehicles can be brought into Egypt from Eilat; the amount of entry duty depends on the type of vehicle, but averages about £E100.

JORDAN

From Cairo, there's a twice-weekly Superjet service to Amman (US\$70, 15½ hours), leaving Al-Mazar Garage near Cairo airport on Sunday and Thursday at 5am. There's also a daily East Delta service to Aqaba (US\$41, 10 hours) at 8pm.

Departing Alexandria, there's one daily Superjet service to Amman (US\$72, 18 hours) at 4pm and another to Aqaba (US\$34, 12½ hours) at 6pm.

These services use the ferry between Nuweiba and Aqaba.

LIBYA

Long-distance buses run from Benghazi to Cairo (24 hours). On the Egyptian side of the border, shared taxis go from Sallum and service taxis travel from Marsa Matruh to the Libyan border.

There are service taxis to the border crossing at Amsaad (£E5) and on to Al-Burdi (LD2) in Libya. At present, however, the Libyan government is not granting visas for independent travel to Libya, only for people on tours organised by a recognised Libyan travel agency.

Sea & Lake**JORDAN**

The excellent fast-ferry service between Nuweiba in Egypt and Aqaba in Jordan leaves Nuweiba at 2pm and takes one hour. One-way tickets cost US\$55, payable only in US dollars. Be at the port two hours before departure. A slow ferry (US\$41/29 per adult/child, 2½ hours) leaves at noon daily.

Free Jordanian visas can be obtained on the ferry if you have an EU, US, Canadian, Australian or New Zealand passport.

SUDAN

The **Nile River Valley Transport Corporation** (☎ in Aswan 097-303 348, in Cairo 02-575 9058) runs a twice-weekly car/passenger ferry to Wadi Halfa in Sudan, leaving Aswan on Mondays around noon. Trips take between 16 and 24 hours. You need a Sudanese visa (available from Cairo). Single fares are £E250 for airline-style seat; £E380 for cabin with bunk. The ferry service is occasionally suspended.

Coming from Sudan, you need an Egyptian visa (available from Khartoum). To bring a private vehicle, you must have a *triptyque* (available from automobile clubs) from the country of registration, or pay hefty customs duty.

Tours

Literally thousands of companies offer tours to Egypt. For one of the most famous, try **Thomas Cook** (www.thomascok.com), which has been showing people the pyramids for over a century.

PORT TAX

Egyptian international ferries charge £E50 port tax per person on top of the ticket price.

GETTING AROUND**Air**

EgyptAir (☎ 0900 70000; ⌚ 8am-8pm) is the main domestic carrier. Fares are expensive and there are no student discounts. During the high season (October to May), many flights are full so it's wise to book ahead.

Bicycle

While you'd have to have a death wish to contemplate cycling in Cairo, it's a great way of getting round the sights of the Delta and the flat Nile Valley. Cycling is a particular pleasure in Luxor, where hiring a bicycle is cheap (around £E6 per day) and easy. Bringing your own is another matter: police restrictions in Upper Egypt mean that you'll have to take the bike on the train between most points of interest on the Nile.

Boat

From liners plying the Suez Canal to ferries crossing the Nile, transport in Egypt has traditionally taken place on the water, and some form of boat ride is an experience you shouldn't miss. Options include taking a glass-bottom boat in Sharm el-Sheikh, crossing the Red Sea to Hurghada, cruising from Luxor to Aswan in luxury, and sailing around the islands near Aswan in a traditional white-sailed felucca.

For more see the Sharm el-Sheikh, Luxor and Aswan sections of this chapter.

Note there are no student discounts on ferry fares.

Bus

Bus services cover almost every destination in Egypt. Deluxe buses, with decent seats, air-con and loud Arabic videos, travel between main cities. Superjet offers the best service. Keep your ticket until you disembark as inspectors board the bus to check fares. There are no student discounts on bus fares.

Car & Motorcycle

Driving in Cairo requires a bewildering knowledge of horn blows and hand gestures. In Upper Egypt the obligation to drive in convoy defeats the purpose of hiring a car, and in the Western Desert police escorts accompany you between the southernmost oases. Some car-hire firms even insist on providing the driver. If you're not put off by this and the numerous checkpoints, then Avis, Budget and Hertz have offices at the airport.

Rates range from US\$50 a day for a Toyota (100km included, US\$0.25 per km thereafter) to US\$90 a day for a Cherokee 4WD, excluding taxes. Fill up when you can – many stations run out of petrol.

The official speed limit is 100km/h on motorways. For those caught speeding, driving licences are confiscated and fines are payable at the police station.

Foreign drivers need an International Driver's License.

Hitching

With police checkpoints throughout Egypt, hitching is not recommended.

Local Transport

Travelling by *serves* (usually minibuses or Peugeot 504 cars) is a quick way of travelling between cities. A driver won't leave until all the seats are paid for.

Calèche (horse-drawn carriages) are a popular way to get around many towns.

Train

The train is rather a hangover from colonial days and in need of modernisation. Travelling by deluxe bus is preferable to the train except on the Cairo to Luxor/Aswan route, when the sleeper service is recommended as something of a train classic. Students with an ISIC card receive discounts of 33% on fares except sleeping-car services.

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