

## Egypt: Travel Information

### The mythical, the miraculous and the chaotic everyday



## Introduction

In the fifth century BC Herodotus wrote of Egypt that 'nowhere are there so many marvellous things...nor in the world besides are to be seen so many things of unspeakable greatness' - and not too much has changed. The Sphinx, the Nile, ancient Luxor, the pyramids - Egypt's scope is glorious. Cairo isn't a gentle city. Home to more than 16 million Egyptians, Arabs, Africans and sundry others, the 'Mother of the World' is an all-out assault on the senses. Chaotic, noisy, polluted, totally unpredictable and seething with people, the sheer intensity of the city will either seduce or appal.



Aswan, Egypt's southernmost city, has long been the country's gateway to Africa. The prosperous market city straddles the crossroads of the ancient caravan routes, at the 'other' end of the Nile. In ancient times it was a garrison town of importance to early Coptic Christians. Cairo doesn't have the resources for graceful boulevards and cobbled squares and the kind of dolled-up, prettified buildings that cry out to be photographed and stuck in an album. Historic buildings are buried in age-old quarters of the city that have yet to be tamed and made tourist-friendly. The Nile is glorious here as it makes its way down from the massive High Dam and Lake Nasser - watching the feluccas glide by as the sun sets over the Nile is an experience you're unlikely to forget. A visit to the Tombs of the Nobles is worthwhile, a highlight being the Nubian Museum.

## Weather Overview

Egypt's climate is hot and dry most of the year. During the winter months - December, January and February - average daily temperatures stay up around 20°C (68°F) on the Mediterranean coast and a pleasant 26°C (80°F) in Aswan. Maximum temperatures get to 31°C (88°F) and 50°C (122°F) respectively. Winter nights only get down to 8°C (45°F), a very Egyptian version of chilly. Alexandria receives the most rain, with 19cm (7.5in) each year, while Aswan is almost bone-dry with just 2mm annually. Between March and April the khamsin blows in from the Western Desert at up to 150kmph (93mph).

## Visa Overview

All visitors to Egypt, except nationals of Malta, South Africa and Zimbabwe are required to have a visa and a passport (which must be valid at least one week beyond period of intended stay). Visas can be arranged through Egyptian embassies worldwide. Visitors from the US, Canada, EU and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries may be able to purchase a visa stamp upon arrival at many large airports if the visit is for tourist purposes. One-month visitor's visas can be extended.

Military permits issued by either the Ministry of Interior or Border Police are needed to travel in the Eastern Desert south of Shams Allam (50km south of Marsa Allam), on or around Lake Nasser, off-road in the Western Desert and on the road between the oases of Bahariyya and Siwa. These can be obtained through a safari company or travel agency at least a fortnight in advance of the trip.

## History:

### Pre 20C

The Nile's fertile banks - the source of economic, social, political and religious life - gave birth to the world's first nation state and a powerful civilisation that invented writing and erected the first stone monuments. Around 5000 years ago the independent riverfront states were unified under Narmer, giving rise to the first dynasty of pharaohs.

The pharaohs were considered divine and they ruled over a highly stratified society. The first pyramid was built in the 27th century BC; over the next 500 years the monuments grew increasingly grand. Monarchical power was at its greatest during the 4th dynasty, when Khufu, Khafre and Mycerinus built the Pyramids of Giza. Through the 6th and 7th dynasties power was diffused and small principalities began to appear. A second capital at Heracleopolis (near present-day Beni Suef) was established and Egypt plunged into civil war.

An independent kingdom was established at Thebes (present-day Luxor) and, under Montuhotep II, Egypt again came under the control of a single pharaoh. From 1550 to 1069 BC, the New Kingdom bloomed under rulers such as Tuthmosis I, the first pharaoh to be entombed in the Valley of the Kings; his daughter Hatshepsut, one of Egypt's few female pharaohs, and Tuthmosis III, Egypt's greatest conqueror.

Amenhotep IV renounced the teachings of the priesthood, took on the title of Akhenaten in honour of Aten, the disc of the rising sun, and established a new capital called Akhetaten devoted solely to the new god. Soon thereafter, Egypt was ruled by generals: Ramses I, II and III, and Seti I. They built massive monuments and temples, but following their reigns the empire was in disarray, allowing the Macedonian conqueror Alexander the Great to arrive in 331 BC and establish a new capital.

Under Ptolemy I, Alexandria became a great city. The Ptolemies ruled Egypt for 300 years, but their reign was plagued by great rivalries amongst the nobles. Meanwhile an expanded Roman Empire began taking an interest in Egypt. Between 51 and 48 BC, Egypt was ruled by Ptolemy XIII and his sister Cleopatra VIII, and Julius Caesar sent his rival, Pompey, from Rome to watch over them. Ptolemy had Pompey killed and banished Cleopatra. Caesar came along, threw Ptolemy into the Nile, appointed another of Cleopatra's brothers, Ptolemy XIV, as joint leader, and became Cleopatra's lover. In 47 BC Cleopatra gave birth to Caesar's son and two years later had her brother killed. When Caesar was assassinated the following year, Marc Antony - one of the new ruling triumvirate - came to Egypt and fell in love with Cleopatra. An unhappy Roman senate sent Octavian to deal with Marc Antony 10 years later. Following the defeat of their naval forces at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC, Antony and Cleopatra committed suicide, after which Egypt became part of the Roman Empire.

When the empire fell apart Nubians, North Africans and Persians invaded, although Egypt remained relatively stable until AD 640 when the Arabs arrived, bringing Islam. They established Fustat (on the site of present-day Cairo) as the seat of an unstable government until the Fatimids took power, building the prosperous city of Al-Qahira (Cairo).

Western European Christians seized much of the weakening empire in the Crusades of the 11th century, but in 1187 the Syrian-based Seljuks sent an army into Egypt and Salah ad-Din (Saladin) fortified Cairo and expelled the Crusaders from Jerusalem. Salah ad-Din enlisted Mamluks (Turkish mercenaries), but they ended up overthrowing his dynasty and ruled for two and a half centuries before Egypt fell to the Turks in 1517. Since most of the Mamluks were of Turkish descent, the Turkish Ottoman sultans, based in Constantinople, largely left the Mamluks alone, as long as they paid their taxes. This state of affairs continued until Napoleon invaded in 1798, only to be ousted by the British in 1801; they

were in turn expelled by Mohammed Ali, a lieutenant in the Albanian contingent of the Ottoman army. Said Pasha, Ali's grandson, opened the Suez Canal in 1869.

## **Modern**

Crippling national debt enabled British and French controllers to install themselves in 1879, and the British terminated the suzerainty that Turkey had over Egypt. During WWI Egypt aligned itself with the Allies, and shortly afterwards the British allowed the formation of a national political party - the Wafd. King Fuad I was elected head of the constitutional monarchy and for the next 30 years the British, the monarchists and the Wafdists jockeyed for power. The Arab League was founded after WWII by seven Arab countries, including Egypt, but the war had left Egypt in a shambles, and its defeat in Israel's 1948 War of Independence saw the chaos escalate. In 1952 a group of dissident military officers, led by Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, orchestrated a bloodless coup. The British and French were loathe to relinquish control, so they invaded. The USA and the Soviet Union joined the United Nations-deployed peacekeepers and insisted that the invaders should leave. Nasser became a hero, particularly among Arabs.

Nasser attempted to unite Egypt, Syria, Yemen and later Iraq in the late 1950s, emphasising Arab unity and demonising Israel. Following months of heightening tension between Egypt and Israel, the Jewish state attacked on 5 June 1967, starting the Six Day War. Israel destroyed the Egyptian air force, captured Sinai and closed the Suez Canal.

Anwar Sadat, Nasser's vice president, took over from Nasser when he died in 1970, and set about improving relations with the West. On 6 October 1973, the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur, Egypt launched a surprise attack on the Israeli occupiers of Sinai. Its army initially beat back the much better armed Israelis; although these initial gains were later reversed, the ceasefire agreement favoured Egyptian interests. In 1977 Sadat began making peace with Israel, leading to the 1978 Camp David Agreement. Israel agreed to withdraw from Sinai, and Egypt officially recognised Israel. Many in the Arab world felt Sadat had betrayed them, and he was assassinated on 6 October 1981.

Husni Mubarak, Sadat's vice president, was sworn in and has been the country's leader ever since. Mubarak has surprised many with his deft political footwork in the troubled region, improving relations with Israel and other Arab states. With the rise of fundamentalism in the Arab world, Mubarak's position has at times been precarious and he has suffered numerous attempts on his life. He sent 35,000 troops to fight against Iraq in the Gulf War, and although the war was seen as Western imperialists fighting Arabs, Egypt's commitment proved useful in improving its relations with the West.

In 1992 Islamic fundamentalists began a campaign of violence and intimidation against tourists and Egyptian security forces. The mid-1990s were characterised by tensions with Sudan over the contested Halaib territory, severe flooding in 1994 and a series of conflicts with fundamentalists culminating in an assassination attempt on President Mubarak in 1995. In 1997, the massacre of more than 70 people, most of them tourists, by Islamic militants shocked Egyptians and caused thousands worldwide to rethink their holiday plans. The subsequent government crackdown contained but a rapidly growing population, coupled with high unemployment and increasing poverty undermined economic and social reforms.

## Recent

President Husni Mubarak was elected to serve his fifth term as president in Egypt's first contested presidential race in 2005. Although he won by a large margin, allegations of voting irregularities and heavy-handed policing have contributed to ongoing criticism that Egypt is far from democratic. Periodic attacks on tourists resumed in Sinai in 2005 and 2006 but are generally assumed to be one-off events rather than a sustained terrorist campaign, and Egypt remains relatively stable. A growing worry for the future is who will succeed the aging president—he's never appointed a vice-president—and whether or not this successor can continue to withstand the intense economic pressure and regional instability.

## Places of Interest

### Temples of Karnak

A fitting monument to Egypt's New Kingdom power, Karnak is a mind-blowing complex of obelisks, columns, sanctuaries and pylons dedicated to the Theban gods and the glory of Egypt's pharaohs. Built and added to for over 1500 years its million-plus square metres offer a crash course in ancient Egyptian architecture.



### Egyptian Museum

Tel : 02575 4319

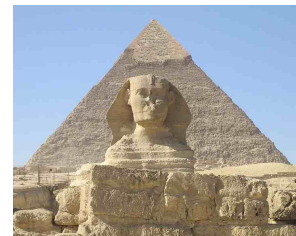
More than 120,000 relics from almost every period of ancient Egyptian history are housed in this remarkable museum. Beyond arranging the exhibits chronologically, little has been done to present any sort of context to the exhibitions but the museum's eccentricity is part of its charm; accidentally stumbling across treasures in somewhat musty rooms is half the fun.

Web: [www.egyptianmuseum.gov.eg](http://www.egyptianmuseum.gov.eg)



### Pyramids of Giza and the Sphinx

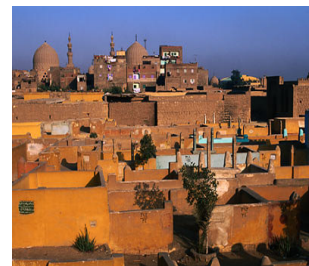
The sole survivor of the Seven Wonders of the World, the Pyramids of Giza live up to more than 4000 years of hype. Their extraordinary geometry and age render them alien constructions rising out of the desert. The Sphinx sits nearby, a 50m-long feline character carved from a single block of stone.



## Attractions

### Cairo

Cairo isn't a gentle city. Home to more than 16 million Egyptians, Arabs, Africans and sundry others, the 'Mother of the World' is an all-out assault on the senses. Chaotic, noisy, polluted, totally unpredictable and seething with people, the sheer intensity of the city will either seduce or appal. Cairo doesn't have the resources for graceful boulevards and cobbled squares and the kind of dolled-up, prettified buildings that cry out to be photographed and stuck in an album. Historic buildings are buried in age-old quarters of the city that have yet to be tamed



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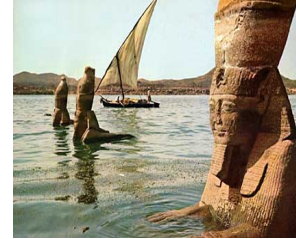
The high population density and lack of room to move throws up startling juxtapositions: mud-brick houses and towering modern office buildings, flashy cars and donkey-drawn carts. Cairenes see nothing strange in this. They aren't driven by the Western obsession to update and upgrade, possibly because they live in such close proximity to a millennia of history (when the pollution haze lifts the Pyramids are visible from the upper storeys of buildings all over the city). The resulting pervasive sense of timelessness is one of the city's great charms.

## **Aswan**

Aswan, Egypt's southernmost city, has long been the country's gateway to Africa. The prosperous market city straddles the crossroads of the ancient caravan routes, at the 'other' end of the Nile. In ancient times it was a garrison town of importance to early Coptic Christians.

The Nile is glorious here as it makes its way down from the massive High Dam and Lake Nasser - watching the feluccas glide by as the sun sets over the Nile is an experience you're unlikely to forget. A visit to the Tombs of the Nobles is worthwhile, a highlight being the Nubian Museum.

The main town and temple area of Swenet were located on Elephantine Island in the middle of Nile (the island was known then as Abu, and later renamed by the Greeks). The temples and ruins here are not nearly as well preserved and impressive as those elsewhere in the country, but there are other good reasons to visit.



## **Travel Alert**

### Sinai Explosions

Explosions in the Aqaba Gulf resort town of Dahab have killed 24 people and injured many more, the third major attack in Sinai in two years. Travellers should keep abreast of local news updates, remain alert and expect delays and increased security checks, especially at border crossings.

## **Health Conditions**

### Schistosomiasis (bilharzia)

Don't paddle in the Nile!

Also known as bilharzia, this disease is carried in freshwater by tiny worms that enter through the skin and attach themselves to the intestines or bladder. The first symptom may be tingling and sometimes a light rash around the area where the worm entered. Weeks later, a high fever may develop. A general unwell feeling may be the first symptom, or there may be no symptoms. Once the disease is established, abdominal pain and blood in the urine are other signs. The infection often causes no symptoms until the disease is well established (several months to years after exposure), and damage to internal organs is irreversible. Avoid swimming or bathing in freshwater where bilharzia is present. Even deep water can be infected. If you do get wet, dry off quickly and dry your clothes as well. A blood test is the most reliable test, but it will not show positive until a number of weeks after exposure.

## **Malaria**

If you are travelling in endemic areas it is extremely important to avoid mosquito bites and to take tablets to prevent this disease. Symptoms range from fever, chills and sweating, headache, diarrhoea and abdominal pains to a vague feeling of ill-health. Seek medical help immediately if malaria is suspected. Without treatment malaria can rapidly become more serious and can be fatal. If medical care is not available, malaria tablets can be used for treatment. You should seek medical advice, before you travel, on the right medication and dosage for you. If you do contract malaria, be sure to be re-tested for malaria once you return home as you can harbour malaria parasites in your body even if you are symptom free. Travellers are advised to prevent mosquito bites at all times. The main messages are: wear light-coloured clothing; wear long trousers and long-sleeved shirts; use mosquito repellents containing the compound DEET on exposed areas (prolonged overuse of DEET may be harmful, especially to children, but its use is considered preferable to being bitten by disease-transmitting mosquitoes); avoid perfumes and aftershave; use a mosquito net impregnated with mosquito repellent (permethrin) - it may be worth taking your own, and impregnating clothes with permethrin effectively deters mosquitoes and other insects.

## **Yellow fever**

A yellow fever vaccination certificate is required from travellers over 1 year of age coming from infected areas. The vaccine against yellow fever is effective. Yellow fever is transmitted through the bite of an infected mosquito. Symptoms of yellow fever range from a mild fever which resolves over a few days to more serious forms with fever, headache, muscle pains, abdominal pain and vomiting. This can progress to bleeding, shock and liver and kidney failure. The liver failure causes jaundice, or yellowing of your skin and the whites of your eyes - hence the name. There's no specific treatment but you should seek medical help urgently if you think you have yellow fever.

## **Getting there**

### Overview

There is a variety of good options for getting to Egypt, with good connections between Cairo and many European cities. Bargain holiday packages including hotel vouchers can work out cheaper than booking a flight independently, and you can just chuck the vouchers away if resorts aren't your style. Flights from elsewhere can be expensive and it's worth looking at making your way to Egypt via Europe, as this is often a cheaper option than flying direct. Egypt's national air carrier is EgyptAir, and Air Sinai also has good connections in Egypt. Most travellers come into Egypt through Cairo, although people are increasingly disembarking at Alexandria, Luxor, Aswan, Hurghada (Al-Ghardaka), Marsa Alam and Sharm el-Sheikh. These airports are serviced by a number of smaller carriers and charter companies with direct connections to Europe. Other connections from elsewhere in Africa and the Middle East include the bus from Israel via the Gulf of Aqaba or the southern edge of the Gaza Strip, and ferries from Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

## **Getting around**

### Overview

Egypt has a very good system of public and private transport. Domestic air travel is clearly the quickest way to get around, although it's probably only worth considering if you have lots of money and little time. Otherwise the transport options include buses, trains and boats, and even camels, donkeys and horses. If you're claustrophobic or have

a weak stomach you might be uncomfortable travelling on the buses and trains, but they are a great way to meet local people and get a feel for the culture. Buses service virtually every town in Egypt and the 5000km (3100mi) of rail also connects just about every town in the country from Aswan to Alexandria. You can also hire service taxis that shunt car loads of passengers between towns and cities. These vehicles are traditionally Peugeot 504s, however Toyota minibuses are becoming popular as service taxis or minibuses, and they usually congregate at the train and bus stations. The drivers wait until they're full (very full!) before they budge. If you want to join the throng and drive yourself, cars can easily be hired from hotels and airports in most Egyptian towns. Not recommended for the fainthearted.

**Fast Facts:**

**Time Zone**

GMT/UTC +2

**Weight measures**

Metric

**Area Sqkm**

1,001,449 sq km

**Area Code**

Country Code: 20

**Population**

69,500,000

**Spoken Language**

Arabic (official)

**Religion**

94% Muslim, 6% Christian

**Currency**

Egyptian Pound (£E)

**Electricity**

220V 50Hz

**Electrical Plug**

European plug with two circular metal pins