

The Best of Egypt

Egypt is such a big and varied country that it's hard to know where to even start describing its best, most intense, and most satisfying places and moments. Every time I'm in the country, I think I've found the best of Egypt, and every time I go back, I find something new that convinces me afresh that this time, finally, I've got them. Egypt offers everything, and more, from sunrise in the desert on the edge of the Great Sand Sea, to sunset over the granite mountains of the Sinai where they meet the shimmering azure of the Red Sea, to trailing my fingers in the cool waters of the Nile from the back of a *faluca* after a day of exploring underground tombs. Below are some highly subjective "best of" lists that I invite you to use in building your own Egypt adventure. I am certain that as you try out some of the places and activities that I have savored over the years, you'll find your own way to appreciate and experience them, and to make the story of Egypt your own.

1 The Best Purely Egyptian Experiences

- **The Call to Prayer from the Citadel** (Fatimid Cairo): As the sun sets over Fatimid Cairo, dozens of mosques send out their calls to prayer. With flocks of pigeons circling in the golden light and the last sun of the day picking out the highlights of the domes below, the ancient chanting surrounds you and takes you to centuries past. See p. 95.
- **Cairo Tower** (Cairo): From this tower in the middle of the city, your view encompasses everything from the Great Pyramid in Giza all the way to the Moqattam Hills on the other side of the valley. For just a moment, it feels as though you can actually get your head around this extraordinarily complex, vibrant city. See p. 82.
- **A Cold Beer at the Cap d'Or** (Alexandria): No visit to Alexandria is complete without a stop at this backstreet pub, which retains the ambience of an era that has now all but slipped away. Look around at the fading posters, and watch the regulars come and go. See p. 148.
- **Tea at the Old Cataract Hotel** (Aswan): If it was good enough for Winston Churchill and Agatha Christie, it's good enough for me. This is a great place to catch the sunset; the sun turns the dunes on the other side of the famous First Cataract of the Nile to a reddish gold, and the *falucas* drift back and forth. See p. 251.
- **Sunrise at the Summit of Jebel Moussa** (Mt. Sinai; St. Catherine): This is where Moses is said to have received the tablets containing the Ten Commandments. The view across the rugged red mountains of the Sinai as the sun rises is unforgettable. See p. 171.
- **Tea at Fishawy's** (Cairo): What could be more Egyptian than drinking sweet tea among the spices, gewgaws, and

crowds of a densely packed souk? Watch the crowds of people from all over the world, and haggle with merchants who will stop by with everything from saffron to sunhats. See p. 121.

• **Palm Sunday in Coptic Cairo** (Cairo): Celebrate Easter with one of the oldest Christian communities in the world. Children and families crowd the ancient church-lined street giving out crosses and little figures made of local palm leaves. See p. 100.

2 The Best of Ancient Egypt

- **The Pyramids in Giza** (Giza): There's no way to come to Egypt and not visit the pyramids. They are as vast and imposing as they were when they were built more than 4 millennia ago, and their impact has not been dimmed by the crowds of tourists and touts. See p. 82.
- **Valley of the Kings** (Luxor): Since it was first excavated at the beginning of the 20th century, this steep-sided valley on the west bank in Luxor has long been drawing tourists to its underground complex of richly decorated tombs. There is now a whole industry built on these visitors, and rightly so—it's a must-see. See p. 229.
- **Sound and Light Show at Karnak Temple** (Luxor): Justly famous for its massive hypostyle hall, this vast temple complex reveals a whole new side of itself at night. Follow the narration through the ancient courtyards, and try to snap a picture of the dramatic lighting effects. See p. 224.

- **Medinet Habu** (West Bank): This often overlooked temple has it all: big walls, glorious gory hieroglyphs, and a great rural setting—and with far less hassle than you get almost everywhere else in Upper Egypt. See p. 226.
- **Temple of Amun** (Siwa): This small, remote temple in the distant western desert oasis is plain and not very well preserved compared to the sites of Luxor and the Giza Plateau, but it does have unparalleled mystique. See p. 261.
- **Saqqara**: The setting makes this site even more special than its historical significance. Like the pyramids in Giza, it sits on the edge of the desert looking down at the river valley. Whereas the megalopolis of Cairo sits at the foot of the monument at Giza, Saqqara is surrounded by greenery and looks like it might have many millennia ago. See p. 123.

3 The Best Islamic Sites

- **Al Azhar Mosque** (Cairo): This mosque has undergone a number of changes since it was built in A.D. 972 and has been the centerpiece of the Islamic world's most prestigious university since A.D. 988. See p. 93.
- **Bab Zuweila** (Cairo): This huge gate, which rises out of the thick-packed confusion of a local souk, was one of the original entrances to the Fatimid city of Qahira (Cairo). Its colossal

shoulders bear witness to the architectural and military power of the 11th-century founders of this dynasty. See p. 93.

- **The Madrasa of Sultan Hassan** (Cairo): This massive example of Mamluke self-aggrandizement casts a massive shadow over the run-down neighborhood that surrounds it. Yet, from inside, the 14th-century domes and courtyards are gracefully

proportioned and somehow human in scale. See p. 97.

- **Mohamed Ali Mosque** (Cairo): Its high Ottoman dome gives this mosque a tremendous sense of calm and space, and the view across old Cairo from the courtyard is second to none. See p. 95.

- **Mosque of Ibn Tulun** (Cairo): Unique, Iraqi-style decorations set this 9th-century mosque apart from others in the city. The enormous courtyard is a reminder that there was once a time when you could build a mosque big enough to hold every man in the surrounding area. See p. 98.

4 The Best Shopping Experiences

- **Aswan Souk:** Even though it's rapidly becoming more touristy, this rambling, sprawled-out souk retains all the vibrancy you would expect of a millennia-old crossroads on the trading routes between Africa and the Mediterranean world. See p. 253.
- **Egypt Craft Center** (8–27 Yehia Ibrahim St., Zamalek, Cairo; ☎ 02/27365123): Here you have low-hassle access to a range of folk crafts from around Egypt. This is a particularly good place to pick up pottery from the Fayum or handmade scarves from Upper Egypt. Proceeds go to support community development nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).
- **Khan al Khalili** (Cairo): This centuries-old souk in the heart of old Cairo is a must for anyone who has the shopping bug or just wants to experience the real hustle and bustle of an Arab city. Take cash, and be prepared to haggle. This is the best place in town to buy novelty T-shirts, souvenirs with your name printed in hieroglyphics, and those little bottles of colored sand that have pictures of camels in them. See p. 96.
- **Khan Msr Toulon** (Tulun Bey Street, Cairo; ☎ 02/33652227): This French-run store, located just

across the street from the mosque of the same name (but spelled differently), has a not-at-all-surprising sense of style. Shelves are stuffed with interesting handicrafts, furniture, and glassware from Cairo and beyond.

- **Nomad** (14 Saraya Al Gezira, Cairo; ☎ 02/27361917): Check out the main branch of this store for a great selection of handicrafts from all over Egypt, including hand-woven Bedouin blankets, silver jewelry, and embroidered pillow slips. Prices are fixed, and staff are friendly and helpful.
- **Siwa Souk:** For an end-of-the-world shopping experience, the central square in Siwa is hard to beat. It wasn't long ago that all the goods brought here were bartered for in this marketplace, and many of the locally made handicrafts on sale here are impossible to find anywhere else. See p. 265 and p. 266.
- **Souk el Fustat** (Cairo): This is a little shopping mall just outside the northern entrance to Coptic Cairo that's aimed squarely at the discerning foreign buyer. Check out the beautiful handmade copies of Mam-luke and Fatimid lamps sold here by Hassan and Mohamed. See p. 119.

5 The Best High-End Hotels

- **Adreer Amella** (Siwa; ☎ 02/2735 1924; www.adreeramellal.net): Gorgeous local scenery meets gorgeous

local architecture in this high-end, high-concept, all-inclusive ecolodge. Bask by the pool, eat local foods, and

pamper yourself in the palatial bathroom, all with an ecofriendly peace of mind.

- **Four Seasons Hotel Alexandria** (399 Al Geish Rd., Alexandria; ☎ **03/5818000**; www.fourseasons.com): The only criticism you could make of this re-creation of a classic Alexandria hotel is that it's just a little too perfect.
- **Four Seasons Hotel Cairo at the First Residence** (35 Giza St., Giza, Cairo; ☎ **02/35731212**; www.fourseasons.com): It says it all that the only hotel in Cairo that competes with the Four Seasons (below) is another Four Seasons. The First Residence is a little out of the center, but it makes up for it by having the greenest view of any hotel in the city—it looks out across the Giza Zoo.
- **Four Seasons Nile Plaza** (1089 Corniche el Nile, Cairo; ☎ **02/27917000**; www.fourseasons.com): It's hard to get any more central or stylish than the smoothly modern

Four Seasons Plaza. From the cutting-edge collection of Egyptian art on the walls to the beautifully designed pool and dining facilities, you can rest assured that nobody's staying anywhere nicer tonight.

- **Hotel Al Moudira** (West Bank, Luxor; ☎ **095/2551440**; www.moudira.com): This is a lovingly put together boutique hotel on the edge of the desert. The individually designed and decorated rooms are spread through a splendidly understated garden, and the pool is a tranquil work of art. The food, though, tops it all.
- **Mena House Oberoi** (Pyramids Road, Giza, Cairo; ☎ **02/33773222**; www.oberoimenahouse.com): Beautiful period furniture in an authentic 19th-century setting, Oberoi service standards, and the best Indian food in town—oh, and did I mention the view of the pyramids on the Giza Plateau from your room?

6 The Best Midrange Hotels

- **Bab Inshal** (Midan el Souq, Siwa; ☎ **046/4601499**): You can't get much closer to the ruins of the old city than the Bab Inshal—it's literally built into the ancient walls. Combine this with gorgeous, traditionally constructed rooms and fantastic food in the rooftop restaurant, and you've got your desert base sorted out.
- **Cosmopolitan** (21 26th of July St., Cairo; ☎ **02/25752323**): Take a step back about 50 years to a quieter, cleaner Cairo, a Cairo where the brass handles on the lifts gleamed unobtrusively and the wooden banisters were polished to a mirror finish. It's still here, faded in places and needing some modern plumbing in others, but basically intact.
- **The Badawiya** (Gama Abdel Nasser St., Farafra; ☎ **092/7510060**; www.badawiya.com): Accommodation in the middle of nowhere doesn't get much better than this. Big rooms made out of local sandstone, deliciously comfortable beds, and endlessly friendly and accommodating staff make this a desert home away from home.
- **Shali Lodge** (El Seboukha St., Siwa; ☎ **046/4601299**): Tucked out of sight amongst the palm trees, this comfortable little hotel combines the smooth lines of traditional Siwan architecture with the best of casual, warm, and efficient Bedouin service. Kicking back in the pool in the heat of the day and watching the palm

trees wave gently in the breeze is pretty close to heaven.

- **Sheraton Luxor** (Khalid Ibn el Walid St., Luxor; ☎ **095/2274544**; www.starwoodhotels.com): This big, secluded hotel at the southern end of Luxor delivers resort-style accommodation and quick, efficient service at a midrange price. Watch the Nile roll slowly past from the riverside pool, or relax in comfort with a beer on the terrace.
- **St. Joseph Hotel Luxor** (Khalid Ibn el Walid St., Luxor; ☎ **095/2381707**): Friendly service, comfy rooms, and a view of the Nile from the rooftop bar make this widely

copied expat favorite the best value for the money in Luxor. Toss in a good location, with restaurants and bars within walking distance of the front door, and you have champagne accommodations on a beer budget.

- **Talisman** (39 Talat Harb St., Cairo; ☎ **02/23939431**): If you want to get away from the cookie-cutter chains and see the real Cairo, but you don't feel ready to kip with the backpacker crowd, head to this downtown boutique hotel in a renovated 19th-century flat. Every room is different, and the hallways are an antiques collector's dream.

7 The Best Budget Hotels

- **El Karm Ecolodge** (Sheikh Awad, St. Catherine, Sinai; ☎ **010/1324693**): This is the only budget hotel that's a destination as well. Classic Nabatean-style rockwork combines gracefully with simple architecture here in the middle of the Sinai. This is a clean, quiet getaway for those willing to rough it a little.
- **Dolphin Camp** (Mashraba, Dahab; ☎ **069/3640081**; www.dolphincamp.net): Grass huts, a sea breeze, and a laid-back attitude are what make Dolphin Camp the place to go hang, hang, and then hang some more. If you feel like splurging, they have rooms with air-conditioning, but if you want to stretch the budget into another week of, well, hanging, then take a hut and let nature keep you cool.
- **El Salam** (101 Corniche el Nil, Aswan; ☎ **097/2302651**): This deceptively large hotel is quiet and takes you back to basics. Compromise the rooms without the en suite, and get a big balcony with a stunning view up and down the Nile. If you

remembered to go to duty-free at the airport, it's the perfect place to put your feet up and toast the end of the day.

- **Mina Palace** (Corniche el Nile, Luxor; ☎ **095/2372074**): Who says you get what you pay for? This is a \$10-a-night hotel with a \$300 view across the Nile. Plus, it has a killer location across the street from the gory-yet-fascinating Museum of Mummification and is halfway between Luxor Temple and the must-see Luxor Museum.
- **Nakhil** (Gezirat al Baraat, West Bank, Luxor; ☎ **095/2313922**): This is a lovely little getaway in the back of the tranquil West Bank. The Nakhil has mid-level rooms for a bottom-end price. About the only thing it lacks, in fact, is the noise and hassle of the East Bank.
- **Nefertiti Hotel** (Al Sahabi St., Luxor; ☎ **095/2372386**; www.nefertitihotel.com): Jammed into the heart of Luxor's tourist souk, the Nefertiti is a travel agent, social hub, pool hall, and Internet cafe all rolled

into one affordable package. Oh, yeah, and some comfy rooms and hot showers are thrown in there as well.

- **Union Hotel** (164 26th of July St., Alexandria; ☎ 03/4807771): This has long been the preferred hideaway of expats on a weekend pass and

archaeologists passing through town on their way to work. The Union plays out the classic budget formula: clean sheets, hot water, and a friendly, honest staff. And if you lean way out from your balcony, you can even see the sea.

8 The Best Restaurants

- **Abu Sid** (Off 26th of July St., Zamalek, Cairo; ☎ 02/27359640): Reservations are required at this upscale eatery, and when you get to the table, traditional Egyptian cuisine never tasted so good. Get down to the classics in an intimate atmosphere decorated with icons of Egyptian culture from the golden days of music and film.
- **Bab Inshal** (Midan el Souq, Siwa; ☎ 046/4601499): This place is about atmosphere as much as the food. The rooftop restaurant at the Bab Inshal is backed into the ruins of the ancient city of Shali in the center of the oasis. The menu of Siwan dishes was developed by a French chef and is at once bold and satisfyingly simple. This restaurant serves the best Egyptian breakfast in the country.
- **Fish Market** (El Geish Road, Alexandria; ☎ 03/4805114): Down-market atmosphere and upmarket food make this the best place to settle into a traditional Alexandrian meal of shrimp and grilled fish. Head down here around sunset to take advantage of the best harbor view in town.
- **La Scala** (Abu Tig Marina, Gouna; ☎ 065/3541145): Look in the window, and you're going to see a basic diner with a long open kitchen and

simple decor. Get down to business with the food, though, and you're going to have the best steak and grilled vegetables on the Red Sea coast.

- **Mogul Room** (Pyramids Road, Giza, Cairo; ☎ 02/33773222): It's a long drive from Downtown Cairo, but the Mogul Room would be worth it even if it was another hour. The food is the best Indian meal in town, and the location—the lush, 19th-century Mena House Oberoi and the pyramids—adds additional spice to the meal.
- **Moudira Hotel Dining Room** (West Bank, Luxor; ☎ 095/2551440): Classically elegant tables amidst the garden of Al Moudira's central courtyard makes for one of the loveliest and most sophisticated restaurant settings in Egypt, and the food lives up to the architectural billing.
- **Tandoori** (Naama Bay, King of Bahrain Street, Dahab; ☎ 069/3600700): From the street, the only indication that this place even exists is the scent of spices that wafts through the doors of the Camel Hotel. Inside you'll find the best north Indian cuisine on the coast at a price that won't make a dent in your wallet.

9 The Best Christian Cultural Sites

- **Al Bagawat Cemetery** (Kharga): One of the largest ancient Christian cemeteries in the world, al Bagawat in

the Western Desert is still comprised of more than 200 domed mausoleums, some of which contain

exceptional wall paintings depicting biblical scenes. See p. 289.

- **Church of St. George** (Cairo): This small, domed, Greek Orthodox church in Coptic Cairo is built on top of the ruins of the Roman Fortress of Babylon. With the lights low and the lines of candles flickering beside the altar, this is one of the most atmospheric spots in all of Cairo. See p. 100.
- **Monastery of St. Anthony** (Red Sea): Set in the middle of the magnificently stark scenery of the remote Red Sea coast, this ancient monastery was built on the site near Anthony's cave where his followers established a camp. The chapel where they buried him is decorated with some of the richest Coptic art in the world. See p. 210.
- **Monastery of St. Paul** (Red Sea): This is a high-walled compound,

fortified against attacks by local Bedouins, that is still a functioning monastery not far from the Monastery of St. Anthony. St. Paul is said to have been fed every day by a crow that brought him bread. See p. 210.

- **Monastery of St. Simeon** (Aswan): This monastery is still massive and imposing despite having been abandoned for centuries. It stands like an abandoned fortress on the edge of the desert on the west bank of the Nile at Aswan. See p. 246.
- **St. Catherine's Monastery** (Sinai): The oldest continually working Christian monastery in the world, St. Catherine's is uniquely steeped in tradition. It's also rich in religious art, having neglected to take part in the 8th- and 9th-century destruction of iconographic art. See p. 171.

10 The Best Resorts

- **Four Seasons Resort Sharm el Sheikh** (1 Four Seasons Blvd., Sharm el Sheikh; ☎ 069/3603555; www.fourseasons.com): Perfect from the moment you ride through the front gate until the time you leave, the Four Seasons in Sharm sets the standard for service and restrained-but-lavish architecture.
- **Le Méridien Dahab Resort** (Dahab; ☎ 069/3640425; www.starwoodhotels.com): In addition to boasting top-notch facilities in a striking location, this stylish new resort impresses from the moment you walk into the lobby with its bold mix of colors and textures and innovative use of light and shadow.
- **Mövenpick Quseir** (Sirena Beach, El Quadim Bay, Quseir; ☎ 065/3332100; www.moevenpick-hotels.com): This low-key, family-friendly resort hugs the coastline, blending with

the local scenery and making a perfect setting for a romantic getaway—even if you have to take the kids along.

- **Oberoi Sahl Hashish** (Sahl Hashish; ☎ 065/3440777; www.oberoihotels.com): With standard rooms that would pass muster as junior suites anywhere else, bathrooms that could do double duty as a spa, and the best massage facility on the Red Sea coast, the Oberoi at Sahl Hashish is guaranteed to put a smile on your face even as it wipes away the lines from around your eyes.
- **The Palace at Port Ghalib** (Port Ghalib, Marsa Alam; ☎ 02/27351962; www.discoverportghalib.com): Sun International's debut on the Red Sea coast is set in a complete, purpose-built village on the edge of a full-size lagoon. The hotel is as top end as it gets, with imposing architecture,

splendid dining, and everything from diving and beach parties to desert safaris.

- **Sheraton Soma Bay** (Soma Bay, Safaga; ☎ 065/3545845; www.sheraton-somabay.com): A hypostyle lobby and a beach that seems to go

on forever make this expansive resort a great place for an active vacation or just lolling about in the sand. Fun architecture, great food, and unparalleled facilities mean a good time whichever way you decide to go.

11 The Best Diving Spots

- **Gifun Island** (off Hurghada): The coral reefs around this big, sandy island are second to none for color and variety. There are at least a dozen places to dive around the edge of the island, and with a good guide you can usually get away from the crowds and have a reef to yourself. See p. 204.
- **Panorama Reef** (Hurghada): This is a long block of vibrant colored coral that offers the possibility of seeing eagle rays, turtles, and even white-tipped and hammerhead sharks. See p. 199.
- **Ras Mohamed National Park** (Sinai): Where the deep waters of the Gulf of Aquaba meet the warm shallow waters of the Gulf of Suez at the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula, this thin finger of a reef houses some of the richest and most colorful coral and fish populations in the world. See p. 180.
- **Seven Pillars** (Soma Bay): As easy for beginners as it is rewarding for experts, the Seven Pillars site off the Sheraton Soma Bay beach has a resident Napoleon fish. It's named for the coral pillars that rise from a depth

of 12m (39 ft.) almost to the surface and play host to scores of puffer, lizard, and lion fish. See p. 199.

- **Straits of Tiran** (Sharm el Sheikh): The warm waters off Sharm el Sheikh offer the possibility of some of the most dramatic drift dives in the world through Jackson, Woodhouse, and Gordon reefs, and dozens of other sites. See p. 179.
- **The Wreck of the SS *Dunraven*** (Sharm el Sheikh): This late-19th-century wreck of a spice ship from Bombay is a popular dive from Sharm el Sheikh. The upside-down hull is broken open, and it's possible to enter the wreck and look at the old boilers. See p. 179.
- **The Wreck of the *Thistlegorm*** (Sharm el Sheikh): Thirty meters (98 ft.) below the surface, between the Red Resort City of Hurghada and the Ras Mohamed National Park, lies this World War II cargo vessel. Check out the vintage motorbikes as well as a pair of locomotives that were flung away from the wreck by the force of the explosions that sunk it. See p. 204.

12 The Best Museums

- **Aswan Museum:** This tiny museum on the southern end of Elephantine Island in Aswan lost most of its best pieces to the new Nubian Museum and, hence, doesn't receive many visitors now. But its 19th-century

building, the residence of the architect of the Aswan Dam, Sir William Wilcocks, is a museum itself and deserves a visit. See p. 245.

- **Egyptian Museum** (Cairo): With a history that goes back to the very

beginning of the archaeological exploration of Europe, the collection of antiquities held by the Egyptian Museum is one of the richest and most varied in the world. From Tutankhamun's tomb to the Fayum portraits, there is no way to come to Egypt and miss this one. See p. 89.

- **Luxor Museum:** It may be smaller than the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, but the Luxor Museum is better lit, better organized, and better documented. Housing an impressive display of ancient Egyptian artifacts, it's not something that you should miss if you're in town. See p. 223.
- **Mummification Museum** (Luxor): It sounds lurid, and it is, but it's also well laid out and holds some impressive items. Kids will particularly enjoy the displays of mummies and

the tools used to embalm them. See p. 225.

- **The Museum at St. Catherine's Monastery:** This monastery's collection of ancient manuscripts is second in size only to the Vatican's. A few of these are on display, as well as some impressive early icons, truly jaw-dropping golden reliquaries, and examples of devotional embroidery. See p. 172.
- **Nubian Museum** (Aswan): This is a long-overdue monument to the land of Nubia, flooded by the construction of the Aswan High Dam in the early 1970s. The museum tries to recreate the lost culture and leads the visitor through the history of the land all the way to its rather abrupt modern truncation. See p. 246.