

Alexandria & the Mediterranean Coast



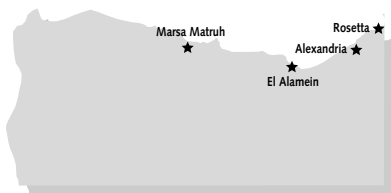
The boundaries of Northern Egypt run smack bang into this dazzling 500km stretch of the Mediterranean seaboard. Here, the fabled city of Alexandria takes its rightful place as the cultural jewel in the coastal crown, while elsewhere the sea's turquoise waters lap up against pristine but mostly deserted shores. It has been dealt the short straw in life-giving fresh-water, and Egyptian holiday-makers, and a few intrepid travellers, have only recently begun to discover the potential of its untouched beaches.

Alexandria wins the unfortunate accolade of being the 'greatest historical city with the least to show for it'. Once the home of near-mythical historical figures and Wonders of the World, only fragmented memories of Alexandria's glorious ancient past remain. Today, however, the city is too busy gussying up its graceful 19th-century self to lament what's been and gone. The town shivers at the thought of its own potential: its streets and cafés buzzing with the boundless energy of a new wave of creative youth.

Nearby Rosetta is famous for the black-stone key that deciphered hieroglyphics and was unearthed here – though this Nile-side port once rivalled Alexandria during that town's more woeful days. Halfway across the coast to Libya, the memorials of El Alamein loom as solemn reminders of the lives lost during the North Africa campaigns of WWII. Meanwhile, not far off, a battalion of resorts offers a white-sand beach distraction from too much war-time reflection. Slumbering on a marvellous, aqua-lined bay for three-quarters of the year, Marsa Matruh screams into life in the summer months as half of the Nile Valley drops in for a visit.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Soak in the 19th-century grandeur through a puff of *sheesha* (water pipe) smoke or a kick-start-strong coffee at one of Alexandria's beautiful **period cafés** (p390)
- Try to grapple with the immense amount of ancient history made in Alexandria at the city's impressive **Alexandria National Museum** (p376)
- Wander down the dusty, donkey-filled street of **Rosetta** (p395) and admire the beautifully restored Ottoman architecture of this once-important seaport
- Be reminded of the ultimate toll paid by soldiers on all sides of the WWII North Africa campaign at **El Alamein** (p398)
- Soak in the stunning white sands and aqua waters of the *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* town of **Marsa Matruh** (p403) – a comatose hamlet in the low season or a heaving holiday metropolis in the summer months



ALEXANDRIA

📍 03 / pop 4.1 million

The city of Alexandria (Al-Iskendariyya) is the stuff that legends are made of: the city was founded by none other than Alexander the Great; sassy queen Cleopatra made this the seat of her throne; the entrance to its harbour was marked by the towering Pharos lighthouse (one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World); and its Great Library of Alexandria was renowned as the ultimate archive of ancient knowledge. Alas, fate dealt the city a spate of cruel blows: today no sign remains of the great Alexander; the city of Cleopatra's day has been mostly swallowed up by the ocean; the Pharos lighthouse collapsed long ago; and the literary treasures of the Great Library were set to numerous torchings. To add insult to injury, Egypt's consequent Muslim rulers moved the capital to nearby Cairo, ignobly thrusting the once influential metropolis into near obscurity for centuries.

In the 19th century a cosmopolitan renaissance had Alexandria flirting with European-style decadence, but it was cut short in the 1950s by Nasser's wave of change. Today, even though the city plays second fiddle to Cairo, modern Alexandria feels like a teenager eager to forge its own identity. The daring new library of Alexandria signalled a brave leap into modernity, the first tentative steps of a city ready to revamp itself for the future. This town is also swooping in on the role of Egypt's culture vulture – legions of young artists and writers are finding their voices and new cutting-edge venues are providing a stage for their prolific output. But whether the new Alexandria forges its own unique path forward, or follows the West's shopping-mall model of a brave new (air-conditioned) world, remains to be seen.

Alexandria, the famed ancient metropolis of the ages, is not easy to find in the city that bears its name today. Nevertheless, the city doffs its hat to an impressive past and successfully marries its 19th-century grandeur with the vibrancy of an energetic youth. This is an ideal place to spend a few days sipping coffee in grand, old-world cafés at breakfast; pondering the city's glorious past at its copious museums before or after lunch; and topping it all off with mouthwatering fish fare over sunset-lit dinners.

HISTORY

Alexandria's history is the bridging link between the time of the pharaohs and the days of Islam. The city gave rise to the last great Pharaonic dynasty (the Ptolemies), provided the entry into Egypt for the Romans and nurtured early Christianity before rapidly fading into near obscurity when Islam's invading armies passed it by to set up camp on a site along the Nile that later become Cairo.

The city was initiated with the conquests of Alexander the Great, who arrived from Sinai having had his right to rule Egypt confirmed by the priests of Memphis. Here, on the shores of his familiar sea, he chose a fishing village as the site for a new city that he hoped would become a bridge between the old Pharaonic world and the new world of the Greeks. Foundations were laid in 331 BC and almost immediately Alexander departed for Siwa to consult the famous oracle, before marching for Persia. His conquering army went as far as India, where he died just two years later, having his body returned to Egypt for burial. When the priests at Memphis refused to bury him, the Greek pharaoh was buried in Alexandria, the city he had conceived as the cultural and political centre of his empire.

Alexander had left one of his generals, Ptolemy, to oversee the development of the new city and the viceroy eagerly continued this work after Alexander's death. Alexandria was filled with architecture to rival the cities of Rome or Athens. To create a sense of continuity between his rule and that of the Pharaonic dynasties, Ptolemy made Alexandria look at least superficially Egyptian by adorning the city with sphinxes, obelisks and statues scavenged from the old sites of Memphis and Heliopolis. The city developed into a major port and became an important halt on the trade routes between Europe and Asia. It's newfound economic wealth was equally matched by its intellectual standing. Its famed library (see the boxed text, p383) stimulated some of the great advances of the age: this was where Herophilus discovered that the head, not the heart, is the seat of thought; Euclid developed geometry; Aristarchus discovered that the earth revolves around the sun; and Erasthones calculated the earth's circumference. A grand tower, the Pharos (see the boxed text, p382), one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, was

built on an island just offshore and acted as both a beacon to guide ships entering the booming harbour and, at a deeper level, as an ostentatious symbol of the city's greatness.

During the reign of its most famous regent, Cleopatra, Alexandria rivalled Rome in everything but military power – a situation that Rome found intolerable and was eventually forced to act upon. Under Roman control, Alexandria remained the capital of Egypt, but during the 4th century AD, civil war, famine and disease ravaged the city's populace and it never regained its former glory. Alexandria's decline was sealed when the conquering Muslim armies swept into Egypt in the 7th century and bypassed Alexandria in favour of a new capital further south on the Nile.

The city went into slow decline all through the Middle Ages and was even superseded in importance as a seaport by the nearby town of Rosetta. Over the centuries its monuments were destroyed by earthquakes and their ruins quarried for building materials, so much so that one of the greatest cities of the classical world was reduced to little more than a fishing village (now Anfushi) on the peninsula between two harbours, with a population of less than 10,000.

The turning point in Alexandria's fortunes came with Napoleon's invasion of 1798; recognising the city's strategic importance, he initiated its revival. During the subsequent reign of the Egyptian reformist Mohammed Ali, a new town was built on the top of the old one. Alexandria once more became one of the Mediterranean's busiest ports and attracted a cosmopolitan mix of people, among them wealthy Turkish-Egyptian traders, Jews, Greeks, Italians and others from around the Mediterranean. Multicultural, sitting on the foundations of antiquity, perfectly placed on the overland route between Europe and the East, and growing wealthy from trade, Alexandria took on an almost mythical quality and served as the muse for a new string of poets, writers and intellectuals. But the wave of anticolonial, pro-Arab sentiment that swept Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser to power in 1952 also spelled the end for Alexandria's cosmopolitan communities. Those foreigners who didn't stream out of the country in the wake of King Farouk's yacht found themselves forced out a few years later, in the wake of the Suez crisis, when Nasser confiscated

many foreign properties and nationalised many foreign-owned businesses.

Since that time the character of the city has changed completely. In the 1940s some 40% of the city's population was made up of foreigners, while today most of it is native Egyptians. And where there were 300,000 residents in the 1940s, Alexandria is now home to more than four million, a figure swelled by the steady drift of people from the country to the city.

ORIENTATION

Modern Alexandria lies protracted along a curving shoreline, stretching for 20km and rarely extending more than 3km inland. The centre of the city arcs around the Eastern Harbour, almost enclosed by two spindly promontories. The city's main tram station, Mahattat Ramla (Ramla Station) on Midan Ramla, where most lines terminate, is considered the epicentre of the city. Two of the city centre's main shopping streets, Sharia Saad Zaghoul and Sharia Safiyya Zaghoul, run off this square. Just west of the tram station is the larger and more formal square, Midan Saad Zaghoul, with a popular garden facing the seafront. Around these two *midans* (city squares) are the central shopping areas, the tourist office, restaurants and the majority of the cheaper hotels.

To the west of this central area are the older quarters of the city, notably Anfushi, and further on the city's best beaches at the more upmarket resort town of Agami. Heading east, a succession of newer districts stretches along the coast to the upmarket residential area of Rushdy, the trendy suburbs of San Stefano and further on to Montazah, with its palace and gardens, which marks the eastern limits of the city. The Corniche (Al-Corniche) is the long coastal road that connects nearly all parts of the city, though crossing it involves playing chicken with swarms of hurtling buses and taxis.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

All of the following stock only a smattering of fiction and nonfiction books in English.

ACML Bookshop (Map pp372-3; ☎ 545 3714; 181 Ahmed Shawky; ☞ 10am-9pm Sat-Thu) Has one of the better selections in Alexandria.

Al-Ahram Bookshop (Map p374; ☎ 487 4000; cnr Tariq al-Horreyya & Talaat Harb; ☞ 9am-4pm Sat, Mon-Thu, 9am-1.30pm Sun)

ALEXANDRIA IN...

Two Days

On day one, grab breakfast and a strong coffee at one of the city's many **period cafés** (see the boxed text, p390) and get a taste of the past at the excellent **Alexandria National Museum** (p376), and the **Greco-Roman Museum** (p375) if renovations are completed. A tasty lunch at one of the many fish restaurants in **Anfushi** (p388) is a must. In the afternoon venture to the cavernous Roman **Catacombs of Kom ash-Shuqqafa** (p377). Back at the Corniche, stop at the delectable **El-Qobesi** (p389) for the best mango juice. Ever. Near **Fort Qaitbey** (p381), grab a sundowner beer at the **Greek Club** (p390). Treat yourself to a great dinner at the **Fish Market** or the **Tikka Grill** (p388) and then, after a stroll down the Corniche, head to the fascinating **Tugareya** (see the boxed text, p391) to relax over a nightcap *sheesha* (water pipe) and some good conversation.

On day two, get an early start to the **fish market** (p384) in Anfushi. Follow with a visit to the **Bibliotheca Alexandrina** (p381), which is a must-see modern confabulation, and the Roman amphitheatre at **Kom al-Dikka** (p377), worth a trip for its exquisite mosaics. In the afternoon you can pop into the **Royal Jewellery Museum** (p383) and finish off with an evening drink at either the atmospheric **Cap d'Or** (p390) or the **Centro De Portugal** (p390).

Four Days

Follow the two-day itinerary, then add a day trip to **Rosetta** (p395) and the mouth of the Nile, and on the fourth day head to **El Alamein** (p398) and spend the afternoon on the beach in **Sidi Abdel Rahman** (p400).

Dar al-Mustaqbal Bookshop (Map p374; ☎ 487 2452; 32 Sharia Safiyya Zaghloul; ☎ 9am-4pm Sat, Mon-Thu, until 1pm Sun)

Cultural Centres

Many of the city's cultural centres operate libraries and organise occasional films, lectures, exhibitions and performances. Take along your passport as you may have to show it before entering.

Alexandria Centre of Arts (Map p374; ☎ 495 6633; 1 Tariq al-Horreyya; ☎ 10am-10pm Sat-Thu) This active cultural centre, housed in a whitewashed villa, hosts contemporary arts exhibitions, poetry readings and occasional free concerts in its theatre. There is also an art studio, library and cinema (free films 6pm each Sunday) on the 1st floor.

American Cultural Center (Map pp380-1; ☎ 486 1009; www.usembassy.egnet.net; 3 Sharia al-Pharaana, Azarita; ☎ 10am-4pm Sun-Thu)

British Council (Map pp372-3; ☎ 545 6512; www.britishcouncil.org.eg; 11 Sharia Mahmoud Abu al-Ela, Kafr Abdu, Rushdy; ☎ 11am-7pm Sat-Thu)

French Cultural Centre (Map p374; ☎ 391 8952; www.alexfrance.org.eg; 30 Sharia al-Nabi Daniel; ☎ 9am-noon & 5-7.30pm Sun-Thu)

Goethe Institut (Map pp380-1; ☎ 487 9870; www.goethe.de/alexandria; 10 Sharia al-Batalsa, Bab Sharqi; ☎ 9am-1pm Mon-Thu, until 2pm Sun)

Internet Access

Internet cafés in Alexandria seem to have the life span of a fruit fly, though as soon as one closes another opens not too far away. Here are but a few.

Farous Net Café (Map p374; ☎ 497 6905; Sharia Tariq al-Horreyya; per hr E£2; ☎ 11am-midnight)

MG@Net (Map p374; ☎ 485 6981; 10 Sharia Shohada; per hr E£2; ☎ 9.30am-2am)

Mougy Internet Cafe (Map p374; ☎ 487 5675; 18 Sharia Koleyat el-Tiba; per hr E£3; ☎ 8am-1am Sat-Thu, 3pm-1am Fri)

Tantan Internet Centre (Map pp380-1; ☎ 485 7353; 18 Sharia Dr Ahmed Badawy; per hr E£2; ☎ 10am-1am)

Zawiya Internet Cafe (Map p374; ☎ 484 8014; Sharia Dr Hassan Fadaly, off Sharia Safiyya Zaghloul; per hr E£4; ☎ 11am-11pm)

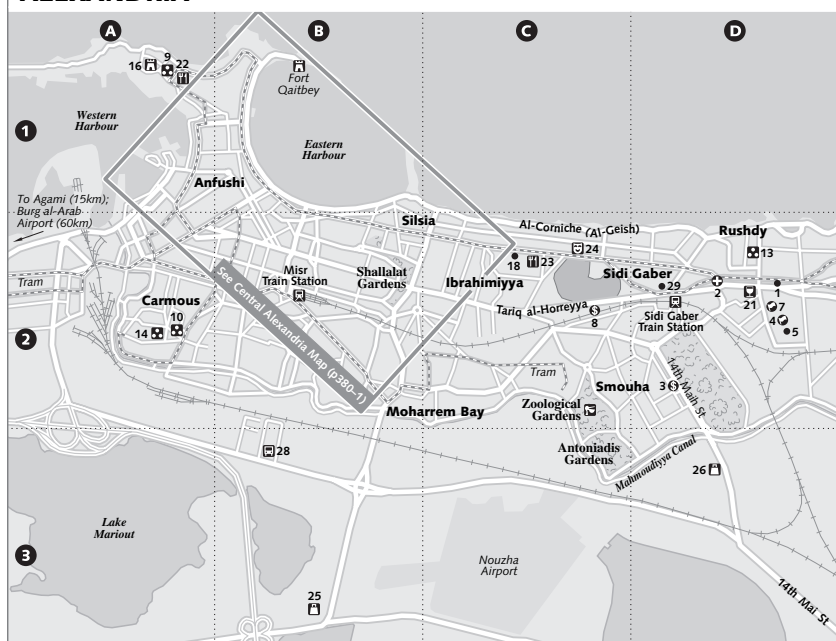
Medical Services

HOSPITALS

Al-Madina at-Tibiya (Map pp372-3; ☎ 543 2150/7402; Sharia Ahmed Shawky, Rushdy; ☎ 24hr) Well-equipped private hospital, accustomed to dealing with foreign patients.

German Hospital (Map pp372-3; ☎ 584 0757; 56 Sharia Abdel Salaam Arafa, Glymm; ☎ 24hr) Next to Al-Obeedi Hospital. Well equipped and staffed by highly qualified doctors. It also has a private day clinic with specialised doctors for nonemergency patients.

ALEXANDRIA



PHARMACIES

There's no shortage of pharmacies around the Midan Ramla, all with at least one English-speaking staff member.

Khalil Pharmacy (Map p374; ☎ 480 6710; Sharia al-Ghorfa at-Tigariya, off Midan Saad Zaghloul; ☏ 9am-10pm Mon-Sat, 10am-10pm Sun)

Money

For changing cash or cashing travellers cheques it's simplest to use one of the many exchange bureaus on the side streets between Midan Ramla and the Corniche. Otherwise, try the following:

American Express (Amex; Map pp372-3; ☎ 420 1050; 14 Mai, Elsaladya Bldg, Smouha; ☏ 9am-5pm Sun-Thu) This office is also a travel agency.

Thomas Cook (Map p374; ☎ 484 7830; www.thomascookegypt.com; 15 Midan Saad Zaghloul; ☏ 8am-4pm)

ATMS

There are dozens of ATMs in central Alexandria, particularly on Sharia Salah Salem and Talaat Harb, the city's banking district. You can also find one at the following banks:

Banque du Caire Sharia Salah Salem (Map p374; 5 Sharia Salah Salem); Sharia Sisostris (Map p374; cnr Sharia Sisostris & Talaat Harb)

Barclays (Map pp380-1; 41 Sharia Sultan Hussein)

Credit Agricole (Map p374; 20 Sharia Salah Salem)

HSBC (Map pp380-1; 47 Sharia Sultan Hussein)

MIBank (Map p374; 45 Sharia Safiyya Zaghloul)

MONEY TRANSFER

For receiving money from overseas or wiring money abroad, Western Union has two offices in town.

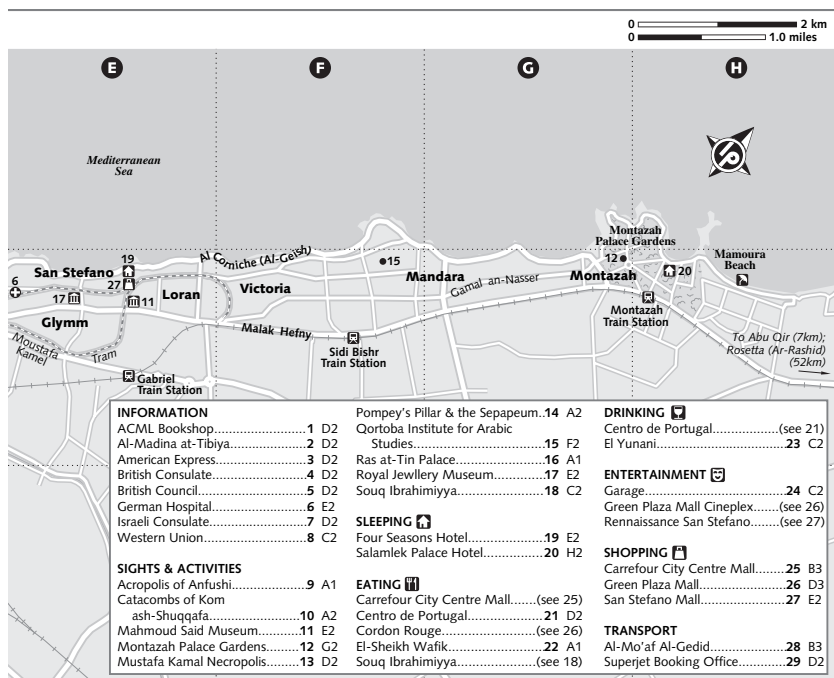
Western Union Tariq al-Horeyya (Map pp380-1; ☎ 420 1148; 281 Tariq al-Horeyya); Tariq al-Horeyya (Map pp372-3; ☎ 492 0900; 73 Tariq al-Horeyya)

Photography

Kodak Express (Map p374; ☎ 486 4072; 36 Safiyya Zaghloul; ☏ 10am-1am) Sells film and memory cards for digital cameras, and prints digital photos.

Post

The main post office is just east of Midan Orabi, and several other branches are dotted around the city.



To pick up poste restante, which is unreliable at the best of times, go to the mail-sorting centre one block west of Midan Orabi.

DHL (Map p374; ☎ 485 19111; 9 Sharia Salah Salem; ☎ 9am-5pm Sat-Thu)

Express Mail Service (EMS) (☎ 8.30am-3pm Sat-Thu)
At all post offices.

Main post office (Map p374; Al-Bursa at Qadima; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Sat-Thu)

Poste restante (Map pp380-1; Mail-sorting centre, Sharia Sahafa; ☎ 6.30am-6pm Sat-Thu) Mail is usually held for three weeks.

Telephone

Menatel cardphones can be found all over the city, although the policy of placing them on street corners can make it hard to hear and be heard. Private call centres are everywhere and they are a much more convenient option.

Telephone centrale (Map p374; Saad Zaghloul; ☎ 24hr)

Tourist Information

Mahattat Misr tourist office (Map pp380-1; ☎ 392 5985; Platform 1, Misr Train Station; ☎ 8am-6pm) A friendly satellite tourist office.

Main tourist office (Map p374; ☎ 485 1556; Midan Saad Zaghloul; ☎ 8.30am-6pm, 9am-4pm during Ramadan) Marginally useful.

Tourist police (Map p374; ☎ 485 0507) Upstairs from the main tourist office.

Visa Extensions

The **passport office** (Map p374; ☎ 482 7873; 25 Sharia Talaat Harb; ☎ 8.30am-2pm Mon-Thu, 10am-2pm Fri, 9-11am Sat & Sun) does visa extensions, usually on the same day. You need to provide one passport-size photo, a photocopy of the relevant pages of your passport, the passport itself and ££12. Head straight to counter 6 on the 2nd floor, though note that extension applications are only accepted until noon.

SIGHTS

The sights of Alexandria lie scattered along its extensive shore. As always, a good place to start is at the beginning: around Midan Ramla, the ancient heart of the city's many incarnations. From here you can explore the Alexandria National Museum, the Graeco-Roman Museum (which might still be closed for renovations – check ahead), the Roman

MIDAN RAMLA & AROUND

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D

INFORMATION

Al-Ahram Bookshop.....	1	C5
Alexandria Centre of Arts.....	2	C5
Banque du Caire.....	3	B5
Banque du Caire (ATM).....	4	B5
Credit Agricole (ATM).....	5	A5
Dar al-Mustaqbal Bookshop.....	6	D5
DHL.....	7	A5
Farous Net Café.....	8	C5
French Consulate.....	9	A4
French Cultural Centre.....	10	C5
Italian Consulate.....	11	C3
Khalil Pharmacy.....	12	B4
Kodak Express.....	13	A4
Main Post Office.....	14	C4
Main Tourist Office.....	15	B4
Mena Tours.....	16	B3
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MBank (ATM).....	18	D4
Mougy Internet Café.....	19	C3
Passport Office.....	20	B5
Telephone Centrale.....	21	A4
Thomas Cook.....	22	C3
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Egypt Hotel.....	33	C3
Hotel Acropole.....	34	B4
Hotel Crillon.....	35	B4
Hotel Union.....	36	B3
Metropole Hotel.....	37	C3
New Capri Hotel.....	38	B4
Nile Excelsior Hotel.....	39	A4
Sea Star Hotel.....	40	C3
Swiss Canal Hotel.....	41	A4
Triomphe Hotel.....	42	B4
Windsor Palace Hotel.....	43	B4

EATING

Al-Shark.....	44	A4
Awalad Abdou.....	45	C6
China House.....	(see 32)	
Elite.....	46	D4
Gad.....	47	B5

Gad.....	48	C3
Mohammed Ahmed.....	49	C4
Taverna.....	50	C3

DRINKING

Athineos.....	51	C3
Bistrot.....	52	C5
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Brazilian Coffee Store.....	54	B4
Cap d'Or.....	55	A5
City Café.....	56	B5
Coffee Roastery.....	57	D4
Delices.....	58	C4
Drinkies Beer Shop.....	59	B4
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El-Tugareya.....	61	A4
Pastroudis.....	62	D5
Sofianopoulo Coffee Store.....	63	A4
Spitfire.....	64	A4
Sultan Hussein.....	65	C4
Trianon.....	66	C3
Vinous.....	67	C5

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Amphitheatre Ticket Office.....	24	D6
Athineos.....	(see 51)	
Cavafy Museum.....	25	C4
Church of St Mark.....	26	A5
Mosque of An-Nabi Daniel.....	27	C5

1

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ENTERTAINMENT

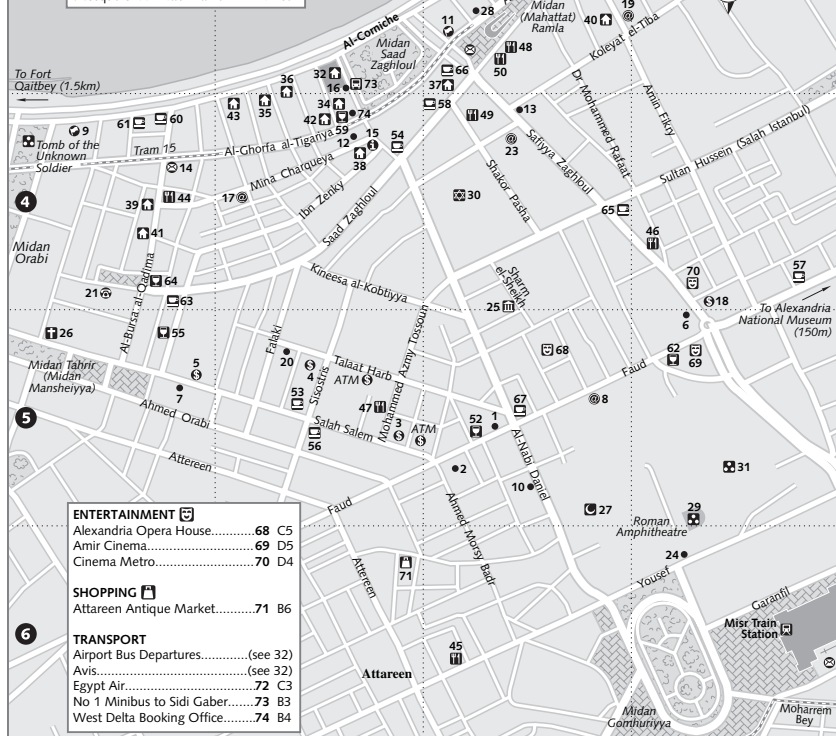
Alexandria Opera House.....	68	C5
Amir Cinema.....	69	D5
Cinema Metro.....	70	D4

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Attareen Antique Market.....	71	B6
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TRANSPORT

Airport Bus Departures.....	(see 32)	
Avis.....	(see 32)	
Egypt Air.....	72	C3
No 1 Minibus to Sidi Gaber.....	73	B3
West Delta Booking Office.....	74	B4



Amphitheatre, and zip over to Pompey's Pillar and the Catacombs of Kom ash-Shuqqafa. Further afield, you can zip along the seafront in a succession of taxis, trams or hustling microbuses to see Fort Qaitbey, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, and then further east to the Royal Jewellery Museum, Mahmoud Said Museum and Montazah.

Ancient Alexandria

The history of ancient Alexandria borders on the mythical, a place of legends inspired by bedtime tales of Cleopatra, the Wonders of the World and that great library. Today a column, some catacombs and a few sculptures in the city's museums are only tangible hints that it all might once have been real. All is not lost, however; thanks to ongoing archaeological research more and more evidence is being unearthed to give physical shape to the ancient city. While the Alexandria of Cleopatra's time lies buried 6m down, every now and then the city gives up more of its secrets as modern developers stumble across new antediluvian finds. In recent years underwater archaeology has been all the rage and has produced some dramatic discoveries (see the boxed text, p376).

Nevertheless, Alexandria remains a city for nostalgics with a fertile imagination. The modern city, built directly on top of the ancient one, often follows the ancient street pattern. The street now known as Tariq al-Horreyya was the ancient Canopic Way, extending from the city's Gate of the Sun in the east to the Gate of the Moon in the west. Two thousand years ago Sharia al-Nabi Daniel was called the Street of the Soma. Standing at the intersection of Sharia al-Nabi Daniel and Tariq al-Horreyya (Map p374), you find yourself at the crossroads at the heart of the ancient city. This, according to the 1st-century-AD geographer Strabo, was where Alexander's tomb once stood. Heinrich Schliemann, who came to Alexandria in 1888 after rediscovering the ruins of Troy, believed that the tomb lay underneath the modern and fairly unnoteworthy **Mosque of An-Nabi Daniel** (Map p374). Recent trial excavations revealed that the mosque does indeed rest on the site of a 4th-century Roman temple, but religious authorities have placed a halt on any further digging. Since then some respected archaeologists have turned their attention elsewhere. The most likely location is now believed to

be the intersection of Tariq al-Horreyya and a street known as R1, which runs through the middle of the Chatby necropolis (p382). Here, where there are extensive Greek graveyards, archaeologists have discovered an impressive alabaster antechamber, which would originally have led to a massive tumulus tomb.

GRAECO-ROMAN MUSEUM

As part of Alexandria's effort to spruce itself up, many of its prime tourist attractions are in the process of being renovated. Unfortunately, the wonderful **Graeco-Roman Museum** (Map pp380-1; ☎ 486 5820; 5 Al-Mathaf ar-Romani; adult/student ££30/15; ☎ 9am-4pm) is currently one of them. Although restoration work is scheduled to be finished by 2009, regular delays and budget overruns mean that this might prove to be a lofty goal. Home to one of the most extensive collections of Graeco-Roman art in the world, with more than 40,000 objects, the collection is on a world tour while the museum is closed, but is scheduled to return upon completion. The following descriptions will be applicable once the new museum reopens.

One of the sights not to miss is the large collection of realistic **terracotta statuettes** (*tanagra*) from the Hellenistic period. Also look for three different **carved heads** representing the city's founder, Alexander. From the Delta region, an impressive wall-hung **mosaic** from the 3rd century BC portrays Berenice, wife of Ptolemy III. Equally impressive is the giant **Apis bull** in basalt from the time of Hadrian, found at the Serapeum, and two carvings of the god **Serapis** – one in wood, the other in marble. Serapis is a wholly Alexandrian creation, a divinity part Egyptian (the husband of Isis) and part Greek, with echoes of Zeus and Poseidon. Ptolemy I promoted him as a way of bringing together his Egyptian and Greek subjects in shared worship. It worked, and the museum is full of images of the god.

No museum in Egypt would be complete without at least one mummy, and this one has a **mummified crocodile**, which would have been carried in processions devoted to the god Sobek. A temple discovered at Al-Fayoum has been rebuilt in the museum's garden and its ornate carved **wooden door** can be found inside the museum.

There are lots of examples of the melding of Greek and Egyptian culture here, including pink-granite statues of Egypt's **Greek-Ptolemaic pharaohs** shown wearing Pharaonic dress and

NAUTICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Alexandria has sunk 6m to 8m since antiquity, so most of what remains of the ancient city lies hidden beneath the modern city or the waters of the Mediterranean. On land, much has been destroyed as the city has grown. Rescue archaeologists such as Jean-Yves Empereur, who has been working in Alexandria for more than 25 years, are allowed to excavate before a new building, tunnel or road project goes ahead, but they are rarely given enough time – usually only a few weeks, or months at most.

But underwater the story is different and each year reveals more finds from the Ptolemaic period. So far, exploration has been concentrated around the fortress of Qaitbey where the Pharos (see the boxed text, p382) is believed to have stood, the southeastern part of the Eastern Harbour where parts of the submerged Ptolemaic royal quarter were found, and Abu Qir (p394) where remains of the two sunken cities of Herakleion and Menouthis were found.

The Qaitbey dive has recorded hundreds of objects, including sphinx bodies, columns and capitals, and fragments of obelisks. Divers have also discovered giant granite blocks, some of them broken as if by a fall from a great height – more circumstantial evidence for the likely end of the Pharos.

In the royal-quarter area, a French-Egyptian diving team has discovered platforms, pavements and red-granite columns that they speculate were part of a former palace ('Cleopatra's Palace', as it is being euphemistically called), as well as a remarkably complete shipwreck carbon dated to between 90 BC and AD 130. In October 1998, in front of a crowd of international journalists, archaeologists raised a beautiful black-granite statue of a priest of Isis, followed by a diorite sphinx adorned with the face of what's thought to be Ptolemy XII, father of Cleopatra.

The most recent excavations in Abu Qir have revealed *L'Orient* (Napoleon's flagship that sunk in 1798); the city of Menouthis with a harbour, houses, temples, statues and gold jewellery; and another city believed to be Herakleion or Thonis, a port that guarded the Canopic branch of the Nile.

Some recovered treasures can be seen in the city's museums, and there are tentative plans for the world's first underwater museum. But the best way of seeing what's in the water is to dive the submerged harbour sites. **Alex Dive** (Map pp380-1; ☎ 03-483 2045; www.alexandria-dive.com; Corniche, Anfushi) in Alexandria arranges dives to several of the above-mentioned locales. A two-day package will set you back around US\$90, with equipment rental an extra US\$20. Be warned, however, that the visibility in the bay can be as poor as 1m depending on the time of year, with September to November offering the clearest water for diving.

crowns, an attempt to legitimise them as the heirs of the pharaohs.

In this museum you will find just about the only historical depictions of the **Pharos** in Alexandria; several terracotta lanterns dating back to the 3rd century BC and shaped according to the three stages of the tower (see the boxed text, p382). There are also several coins presented here from Alexander's time, displaying a portrait of the Macedonian, and several bearing profiles of a large-nosed Cleopatra.

ALEXANDRIA NATIONAL MUSEUM

The excellent **Alexandria National Museum** (Map pp380-1; ☎ 483 5519; 110 Tariq al-Horreyya; adult/student ££30/15; 🕒 9am-4pm) sets new benchmarks for summing up Alexandria's impressive past. With a small, thoughtfully selected and well-labelled collection singled out from

Alexandria's other museums, it does a sterling job of relating the city's history from antiquity until the modern period. Housed in a beautifully restored Italianate villa, it stocks several thousand years of Alexandrian history, arranged chronologically over three cryogenically air-conditioned floors.

The ground floor is dedicated to Graeco-Roman times, where highlights include a sphinx and other sculptures found during underwater excavations at Abu Qir. Look for the small statue of the Greek god Harpocrates with a finger to his lips (representing silence), who was morphed from the original Egyptian god Horus. Also check out the beautiful statue of a Ptolemaic queen, with Egyptian looks and a Hellenistic body. The basement covers the Pharaonic period, with finds from all over Egypt, including an unusual New

Kingdom pottery jar with the god Bes and the head of Queen Hatshepsut in painted limestone. The top floor displays artefacts from Islamic and modern periods, with coins, Ottoman weapons and jewels from the Royal Jewellery Museum (p383). Early coexistence of Alexandria's major religions is represented by a carved wooden cross encircled by a crescent. Well-written panels on the walls provide useful insights into the life, art and beliefs of the Alexandrians through the centuries.

ROMAN AMPHITHEATRE (KOM AL-DIKKA)

While the 13 white-marble terraces of the only **Roman Amphitheatre** (Map p374; ☎ 486 5106; Sharia Yousef, off Midan Gomhuriyya; adult/student E£15/10; 🕒 9am-5pm) in Egypt may not be impressive in scale, they remain a superbly preserved ode to the days of the centurion. This site was discovered when foundations were being laid for apartments building on a site known unceremoniously as Kom al-Dikka (Mound of Rubble). Excavation has currently shifted to the north, where a team is working to expose the remains of Roman-era baths and a villa. In Ptolemaic times this area was known as the Park of Pan, a pleasure garden where citizens of Alexandria could indulge in various lazy pursuits. There's a large, nine-panel floor mosaic masterpiece here known as the **villa of the birds**. To see it, you will need to buy a separate ticket (adult/student E£10/5) at the amphitheatre main ticket office opposite Mahattat Misr train station.

POMPEY'S PILLAR & THE SERAPEUM

This massive 30m-high column, hewn from red Aswan granite, is known as **Pompey's Pillar** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 484 5800; Carmous; adult/student E£15/10; 🕒 9am-4pm), looming over the debris of the glorious ancient settlement of Rhakotis, the original township from which Alexandria grew. For centuries the column has been one of the city's prime sights, a single shaft of tapered granite, 2.7m at its base and capped by a fine Corinthian capital. The column was named by travellers who remembered the murder of the Roman general Pompey by Cleopatra's brother, but an inscription on the base (presumably once covered with rubble) announces that it was erected in AD 291 to support a statue of the emperor Diocletian.

The column rises out of the disappointing ruins of the **Temple of Serapeum**, a magnificent structure that stood here in ancient times. It had 100 steps leading past the living quarters

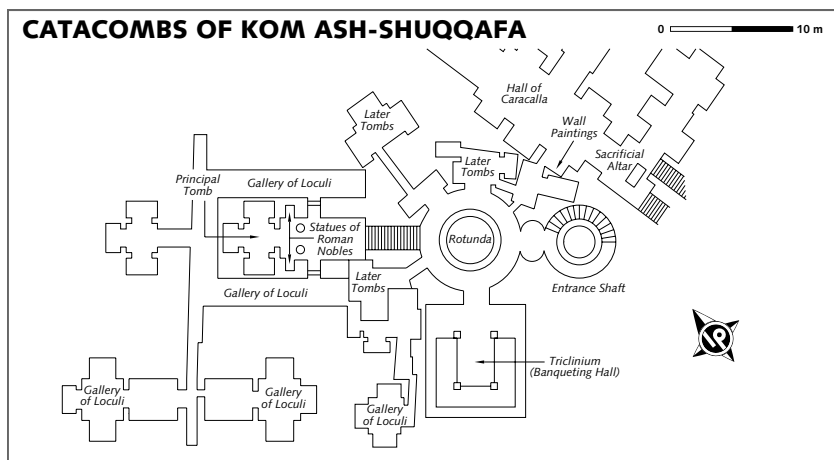
of the priests to the great temple of Serapis, the manmade god of Alexandria (see p375). Also here was the 'daughter library', the second great library of Alexandria, which was said to have contained copies and overflow of texts held in the Great Library of Alexandria, the Mouseion library (see the boxed text, p383). These rolls could be consulted by anyone using the temple, making it one of the most important intellectual and religious centres in the Mediterranean. In AD 391 Christians launched a final assault on pagan intellectuals and destroyed the Serapeum and its library, leaving just the lonely pillar standing. The site is now little more than rubble pocked by trenches and holes with a few sphinxes (originally from Heliopolis), a surviving Nilometer and the pillar – the only ancient monument remaining whole and standing today in Alexandria.

To reach the pillar, walk west from Midan Gomhuriyya (the Misr train station square), following the tram tracks along Sharia Sherif. The entrance to the Serapeum is 300m past the major bend in the road on the right.

CATACOMBS OF KOM ASH-SHUQQAFA

About five minutes' walk south of Pompey's Pillar is **Kom ash-Shuqqafa** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 484 5800; Carmous; adult/student E£25/15; 🕒 9am-5pm). Discovered accidentally in 1900 when a donkey disappeared through the ground, these catacombs are the largest known Roman burial site in Egypt. This impressive feat of engineering was one of the last major works of construction dedicated to the religion of ancient Egypt. Demonstrating Alexandria's hallmark fusion of Pharaonic and Greek styles, the architects used a Graeco-Roman approach in their construction efforts. The catacombs consist of three tiers of tombs and chambers cut into bedrock to a depth of 35m. The bottom level, some 20m below street level, is flooded and inaccessible but the areas above are impressive enough on their own.

Entering through a spiral staircase, the bodies of the dead would have been lowered on ropes down the centre of this circular shaft. The staircase leads off to a **rotunda** with a central well piercing down into the gloom of the flooded lower level. When the catacombs were originally constructed in the 2nd century AD, probably as a family crypt, the rotunda would have led to the **tridinium** (to your left) and principal tomb chamber (straight ahead) only. But over the 300 years the tomb was in



use, more chambers were hacked out until it had developed into a complex that could accommodate more than 300 corpses.

The triclinium was a banqueting hall where grieving relatives paid their last respects with a funeral feast. Mourners, who returned to feast after 40 days and again on each anniversary, reclined on the raised benches at the centre of the room around a low table. Tableware and wine jars were found when the chamber was excavated.

Back in the rotunda, head down the stairs to the **principal tomb**, the centrepiece of the catacombs. Here, an antechamber with columns and pediment leads through to an inner sanctum. The typical Alexandrian-style decoration shows a weird synthesis of ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman funerary iconography. The doorway to the inner chamber is flanked by figures representing Anubis, the Egyptian god of the dead, but dressed as a Roman legionary and with a serpent's tail representative of Agathos Daimon, a Greek divinity.

From the antechamber a couple of short passages lead to a large U-shaped chamber lined with **loculi** – the holes in which the bodies were placed. After the body (or bodies, as many of the loculi held more than one) had been placed inside, the small chamber was sealed with a plaster slab.

Back up in the rotunda, four other passages lead off to small clusters of tombs. One of these gives access to an entirely different complex, known as the **Hall of Caracalla**. This had its own staircase access (long-since caved

in) and has been joined to Kom ash-Shuqqafa, which it predates, by the efforts of tomb robbers who hacked a new passageway. Beside the hole in the wall, a painting shows the mummification of Osiris and the kidnapping of Persephone by Hades, illustrating ancient Egyptian and Greek funerary myths.

Central Alexandria

'Like Cannes with acne' was Michael Palin's verdict on Alexandria's sweeping seafront **Corniche** (in his book *Around the World in 80 Days*). Right in the middle of the broad Corniche is the legendary **Cecil Hotel** (Map p374), overlooking Midan Saad Zaghloul. Built in 1930, it's an Alexandrian institution and a memorial to the city's *belle époque*, when guests included Somerset Maugham, Noel Coward and Winston Churchill, and the British Secret Service operated out of a suite on the 1st floor. The hotel was eternalised in Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*.

The area around **Midan Ramla** is full of mini time capsules of the city's cosmopolitan past; take a look in the **Pharmacie Suisse** (Map p374), with its beautiful dark-wood and glass cabinets painted with skull and crossbones and the warning '*substances toxique*'. Next door is **Athineos** (see the boxed text, p390), a once-grand tearoom formerly frequented by Greek girls and besuited Egyptian pashas.

Midan Ramla was roughly the site of the **Caesareum**, a large sanctuary and temple initiated by Cleopatra in honour of the deified Julius Caesar, and continued by Augustus, the

first Roman ruler of Egypt. Two great obelisks brought up from Heliopolis marked the entrance to the sacred site. Long after the Caesareum disappeared the obelisks remained standing, until the 19th century when Mohammed Ali gave them away. They now grace London's Victoria Embankment and New York's Central Park.

Just south of here is Alexandria's fabulous Italian-built **synagogue** (Map p374). Erected more than a century ago, it served a thriving, wealthy, cosmopolitan Jewish community of about 15,000. Since the wars with Israel and the 1956 Suez crisis, that community has dwindled so that now when the synagogue opens each Shabbat, it rarely has the necessary 10 men to hold a service. Casual visitors are not usually admitted.

MIDAN TAHRIR

Midan Tahrir (Liberation Square; Map pp380–1) was laid out in 1830 as the centrepiece of Mohammed Ali's new look: Alexandria goes to Europe. The impressive **statue** (Map pp380–1) on a plinth at the centre of the *midan* is Mohammed Ali on horseback. A recent clean up has done wonders to accentuate the fine architecture of the square's surrounding buildings.

Near the eastern end of the square, in a peaceful garden, is the Anglican **Church of St Mark** (Map p374) with memorials to British residents and soldiers. **Midan Orabi** (Map p374), which runs from Tahrir to the sea, was once the fine French Gardens. A passage into the grand building of the Okelle Monferrato department store on the corner of both squares leads to the wonderful **Ahwa al-Hind** (Map pp380–1), a coffeehouse where the men who play dominoes and smoke *sheeshas* (water pipe) look like they've been entrenched there for centuries (for more details, see p390).

ANFUSHI

Charismatic Anfushi, the old Turkish part of town, was once where stuffy Alexandria came to let down its hair. While Midan Ramla and the Midan Tahrir area were developed along the lines of a European model in the 19th century, Anfushi remained untouched, an indigenous quarter standing in counterpoint to the new cosmopolitan city. This is where writer Lawrence Durrell's characters came in search of prostitutes and a bit of rough trade. Today it remains one of the poorest parts of the city, where a huge number of people live squeezed into atmospheric but old and

decaying buildings, many of which seem to be teetering on the verge of collapse.

The beautiful little **Terbana Mosque** (Map pp380–1) stands at the junction of Sharia Fransa and Souq al-Kharateen. This entire quarter, known as Gumruk, stands on land that was underwater in the Middle Ages. Late-17th-century builders managed to incorporate bits of ancient Alexandria in the mosque's structure, reusing two classical columns to support the minaret. The red-and-black-painted brickwork on the façade is typical of the Delta-style architecture. The **Shorbaji Mosque** (Map pp380–1; Sharia Nokrash), nearby, is also built with salvaged remnants of antiquity.

Continuing on Sharia Fransa the street narrows before opening suddenly into a *midan* dominated by the large, white **Mosque of Abu Abbas al-Mursi** (Map pp380–1). Built in 1943 on the site of an earlier mosque that covered the tomb of a 13th-century Muslim saint, this is a modern, but nonetheless impressive, example of Islamic architecture.

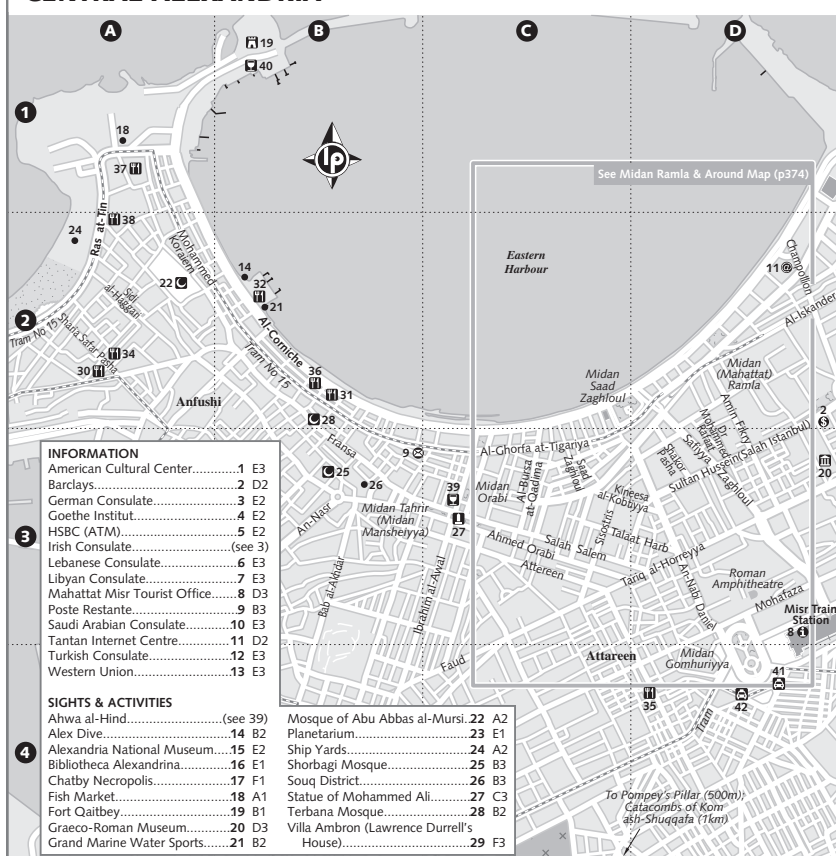
If you're keen on tombs, and who isn't, check out nearby **Necropolis of Anfushi** (Map pp372–3; ☎ 486 5820; Qasr Ras at-Tin; adult/student EE15/10; ☒ 10am–5pm), with five tombs dating back to the 2nd and 1st centuries BC. The two principal tombs contain some faded wall decoration intended to imitate marble and alabaster. Though not quite as eloquent as the catacombs of Kom ash-Shuqqafa, the Anfushi tombs reiterate the way the Greeks of Alexandria assimilated Egyptian beliefs into their funerary practices. Just beyond the tombs is the **Ras at-Tin Palace** (Map pp372–3), a centre of power during the first half of the 19th century when Mohammed Ali summered here. It's from here that King Farouk boarded his yacht and departed from Egypt after abdicating on 26 July 1956. It's now closed to the public.

Literary Alexandria

Many a traveller arrives at Misr Train Station with a copy of Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* in hand, for Alexandria is better known for its literature and writers than for any bricks-and-mortar monuments. Unlike the Alexandria of ancient days past, the Alexandria evoked by Durrell, EM Forster and the Alexandrian-Greek poet Constantine Cavafy can still be seen draped over the buildings of the city's central area.

Born of Greek parents, **Cavafy** (1863–1933) lived all but a few of his 70 years in Alexandria.

CENTRAL ALEXANDRIA



In some poems he resurrects figures from the Ptolemaic era and classical Greece, in others he captures fragments of the city through its routines or chance encounters. He was born into one of the city's wealthiest families, but a reversal of fortune forced him to spend most of his life working as a clerk for the Ministry of Public Works, in an office above the Trianon café (see the boxed text, p390).

Cavafy spent the last 25 years of his life in a 2nd-floor apartment, above a ground-floor brothel, on the former rue Lepsius (now Sharia Sharm el-Sheikh). With a Greek church (St Saba Church) around the corner and a hospital opposite, Cavafy thought this was the ideal place to live; somewhere that could cater for the flesh, provide forgiveness for sins

and a place in which to die. The flat is now preserved as the **Cavafy Museum** (Map p374; ☎ 486 1598; 4 Sharia Sharm el-Sheikh; admission ££8; 🕒 10am-4pm Tue-Sun), with two of the six rooms arranged as Cavafy kept them. Editions of the poet's publications and photocopies of his manuscripts, notebooks and correspondence lie spread out on tables throughout the rooms.

Cavafy was first introduced to the English-speaking world by EM Forster (1879-1970), the celebrated English novelist who'd already published *A Room With A View* and *Howards End* when he arrived in Alexandria in 1916. Working for the Red Cross, Forster spent three years in the city and, although it failed to find a place in his subsequent novels, he compiled what he referred to as an 'antiguide'. His



Alexandria: A History & Guide was intended, he explained, as a guide to things not there, based on the premise that 'the sights of Alexandria are in themselves not interesting, but they fascinate when we approach them from the past'.

The guide provided an introduction to the city for Lawrence Durrell (1912–90), who arrived in Egypt 22 years after Forster's departure. Durrell had been evacuated from Greece and resented Alexandria, which he called a 'smashed up broken down shabby Neapolitan town'. But as visitors discover today, first impressions are misleading and between 1941 and 1945 Durrell found great distraction in the slightly unreal air of decadence and promiscuity engendered by the uncertainties of the ongoing desert war.

Committed fans of the *Alexandria Quartet* might like to search out the **Villa Ambron** (Map pp380–1) where Durrell lived and wrote during the last two years of the war. Gilda Ambron, whose name appeared in the *Quartet's* 'Balthazar', painted with her mother in a studio in the garden which they shared with their neighbour Clea Badaro, who provided inspiration for the character of Clea in the *Quartet*. Durrell's room was on top of an octagonal tower in the garden, though sadly the place has deteriorated badly over the past couple of decades. If you're in for a pilgrimage anyway, from Misr Train Station walk southeast down Sharia Moharrem Bey, then at the little square at the end turn left on Sharia Nabil al-Wakad. Sharia Maamoun is about 200m along on the right. The Villa Ambron is No 19.

Fort Qaitbey

The Eastern Harbour is dominated by the fairy-tale perfect **Fort Qaitbey** (Map pp380-1; ☎ 486 5106; Eastern Harbour; adult/student E£20/10; 🕒 9am-6pm summer, 9am-4pm winter). Built on a narrow peninsula by the Mamluk sultan Qaitbey in AD 1480, it sits on the remains of the legendary Pharos lighthouse (see the boxed text, p382).

The lighthouse, which had been in use for some 17 centuries, was finally destroyed by an earthquake and was in ruins for more than 100 years when Qaitbey ordered the fortification of the city's harbour. Material from the fallen Pharos was reused, and if you get close to the outer walls you can pick out some great pillars of red granite, which in all likelihood came from the ancient lighthouse. Other parts of the ancient building are scattered around the nearby seabed.

The fort has recently been renovated and is now open to the public. It makes for a pleasant walk and the view back across the harbour is spectacular, with a foreground of colourful bobbing fishing boats and, in the distance, the unlike disk of the new library. There's also a lively fish market nearby (see p384).

From Midan Ramla, it's a 30- to 45-minute walk along the Corniche. Otherwise take yellow tram 15 from Midan Ramla or flag down any of the microbuses barrelling along the Corniche. A taxi should cost E£5.

Eastern Suburbs

BIBLIOTHECA ALEXANDRINA

While trying to find a fitting replacement for the original library of Alexandria might seem

THE PHAROS

The Egyptian coast was a nightmare for ancient sailors, the flat featureless shoreline making it hard to steer away from hidden rocks and sand banks. To encourage trade, Ptolemy I ordered a great tower to be built, one that could be seen by sailors long before they reached the coast. After 12 years of construction, the tower, or Pharos, was inaugurated in 283 BC. The structure was added to until it acquired such massive and unique proportions that ancient scholars regarded it as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

In its original form the Pharos was a simple marker, probably topped with a statue, as was common at the time. The tower became a lighthouse, so historians believe, in the 1st century AD, when the Romans added a beacon, probably an oil-fed flame reflected by sheets of polished bronze. According to descriptions from as late as the 12th century, the Pharos had a square base, an octagonal central section and a round top. Contemporary images of the Pharos still exist, most notably in a mosaic in St Mark's Basilica in Venice and another in a church in eastern Libya, and in two terracotta representations in Alexandria's Graeco-Roman Museum.

In all, the Pharos withstood winds, floods and the odd tidal wave for 17 centuries. However, in 1303 a violent earthquake rattled the entire eastern Mediterranean and the Pharos was finally toppled. A century later the sultan Qaitbey quarried the ruins for the fortress that still stands on the site.

a Herculean task, the new **Bibliotheca Alexandrina** (Map pp380-1; ☎ 483 9999; www.bibalex.org; Corniche al-Bahr, Chatby; adult/student ££10/5; 🕒 11am-7pm Sun-Thu, 3-7pm Fri & Sat) has managed it with aplomb. Officially opened in 2002, and inspired by the grandeur of the original, this impressive piece of 20th-century architecture has firmly replanted the city back on the world cultural map. The original library was founded by the first Ptolemy in the late 3rd century BC, shortly after the city itself, and was one of the greatest of all classical institutions (see the boxed text, opposite).

The impressive building housing the modern library was designed as a gigantic angled disc embedded in the ground – a second sun rising out of the Mediterranean. The ancient wealth of learning is lyrically evoked on the curved exterior walls, which are carved with giant letters, pictograms, hieroglyphs and symbols from every known alphabet. In keeping with its declared intention of becoming 'the world's window on Egypt and Egypt's window on the world', the new library has room for eight million books in a vast rotunda space that looks like it might have been sculpted from airplane wings. And it, of course, has lots of windows. The complex has become one of Egypt's major cultural venues and a stage for numerous international performers.

The permanent **Impressions of Alexandria** exhibit, tracing the history of the city through drawings, maps and early photographs, is definitely worth a visit. Also included in the ticket price is a guided tour in several languages introducing visitors to the history of the an-

cient library and explaining the significance of the modern one. **Culturama** (☎ 483 9999, ext 1574; admission free; 🕒 shows in French 12.30pm, in English 1.30pm Sun-Thu) is an interactive show (15 to 30 minutes) portraying Egypt's history on nine screens. Adjacent rooms hold the **Manuscript Museum** (adult/student ££20/10), containing ancient manuscripts and antiquarian books, and a temporary art exhibition space. In the library's basement is the **Antiquities Museum** (adult/student ££20/10), containing some overspill from the Graeco-Roman Museum, including a fine Roman mosaic of a dog discovered when the foundations of the library were dug. Free high-tech PDA (personal digital assistant) guides are available in English, Arabic and French. There's also a bookshop in the foyer, a conference centre with exhibition halls and a **Planetarium** (☎ 483 9999, ext 1451; admission ££25; 🕒 shows at 11.30pm & 1.30pm daily, also 4pm & 5pm Thu-Sat), which is a separate, spherical structure looming on the outside plaza like the Death Star from *Star Wars*.

Entry tickets can be bought just outside the main library entrance, where all bags must also be checked. Tickets for the Antiquities Museum, Manuscript Museum and the Planetarium are bought at their respective entrances.

NECROPOLI

The **Chatby necropolis** (Map pp380-1; Sharia Port Said, Chatby; adult/student ££15/10; 🕒 9am-4pm) is considered to be the oldest necropolis in Alexandria. Discovered in 1904, the burials here date from the 4th century BC, soon after the city's found-

ing, and belong to the earliest generations of Alexandrians. Appropriately, if current archaeological thinking is correct, Alexander the Great may also have been interred here at one time. Further east is the **Mustafa Kamal necropolis** (Map pp372-3; Sharia al-Moaskar ar-Romani, Rushdy; adult/student £15/10; ☎ 9am-4pm), which has four tombs, two in mint condition, and is interesting for the Doric columns at their centre.

Bus 218 from Midan Ramla will drop you near the Chatby necropolis. To get to the Mustafa Kamal necropolis, take tram 1 or 2 to the Mustafa Kamal as-Sughayyer stop and walk east a couple of blocks to Sharia al-Moaskar ar-Romani. Turn left here (towards the sea) and walk a couple more blocks.

ROYAL JEWELLERY MUSEUM

It's not easy, in a country with such a long line of monarchs, to make a name for yourself, but Farouk, the last king of Egypt, succeeded. Renowned for extravagance, excess, womanising and a love of gambling, he once lost US\$150,000 in a single sitting at the gaming tables, at a time when the majority of his subjects struggled in poverty.

The 1952 Revolution would no doubt have happened without him, but his decadence only hastened the demise of the house of Mohammed Ali. The **Royal Jewellery Museum** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 582 8348; 27 Sharia Ahmed Yehia Pasha, Glymm; adult/student ££35/20; ☎ 9am-4pm) is a testament to his excesses, housing a glitzy collection of personal and family heirlooms. Aside from the standard (medals, jewels etc), exhibits include diamond-encrusted garden tools, jewelled watches with hand-painted miniature portraits and a golden chess set. The collection is housed in a lovely villa formerly belonging to the family of Farouk's first queen. It retains some wonderfully eclectic décor: the ceilings reach new heights of kitsch with pink cherubs on cottonwool clouds.

To get to the museum take tram 2 from Midan Ramla and get off at the Qasr as-Safa stop. The museum was closed for renovation at our last visit, with a scheduled opening time of 'two months'. However, that was the same line given to us on our previous visit two years prior – check with the tourist office before you head out here.

THE GREAT LIBRARY OF ALEXANDRIA

The original Library of Alexandria was the greatest repository of books and documents in all of antiquity. Ptolemy I established the library in 283 BC as part of a larger research complex known as the Mouseion ('Shrine of the Muses', the source of today's word museum). This dedicated centre of learning housed more than 100 full-time scholars and boasted lecture areas, gardens, a zoo, shrines and the library itself. Uniquely, this was one of the first major 'public' libraries and was open to all persons with the proper scholarly qualifications.

Demetrius Phalereus, a disciple of Aristotle, was charged with governing the library and together with Ptolemy I and his successors established the lofty goal of collecting copies of all the books in the world. Manuscripts found on ships arriving at Alexandria's busy port were confiscated by law and copied, and merchants were sent to scour the markets of other Mediterranean cities looking for tomes of all descriptions. Most books back then consisted of papyrus scrolls, often translated into Greek, and rolled and stored in the library's many labelled pigeon holes. At its height the library was said to contain more than 700,000 works, which indicated some duplication as this was believed to be more than the number of published works in existence. The library soon exceeded its capacity and a 'daughter library' was established in the Temple of Serapeum (see p377) to stock the overflow. The vast collection established Alexandria's position as the pre-eminent centre of culture and civilisation in the world.

It is uncertain exactly who was responsible for the destruction of the ancient world's greatest archives of knowledge, though there are several suspects. Julius Caesar is the first. Caesar set fire to Alexandria's harbour, which also engulfed the part of the city the library stood in, in his scrap with Pompey in 48 BC. In AD 270 Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra (now Syria), had captured Egypt and clashed with Roman emperor Aurelian here, the resulting siege destroying more of the library. At this time Alexandria's main centre of learning moved to the 'daughter library'. Early Christians are next in line for the blame: the daughter library, located in the Temple of Serapeum, was finally destroyed as part of an antipagan purge led by Christian Roman Emperor Theodosius in 391 AD.

MAHMOUD SAID MUSEUM

He might be little known outside his home country, but Mahmoud Said (1897–1964) was one of Egypt's finest 20th-century artists. A judge by profession, he moonlighted as a painter and became a key member of a group of sophisticates devoted to forging an Egyptian artistic identity in the 1920s and 1930s. Said's work has echoes of the past (some of his portraits bear resemblance to the Graeco-Roman Fayoum Portraits; see the boxed text, p209) but he also blended European and American influences, at times experimenting with cubism and social realism. The **Mahmoud Said Museum** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 582 1688; 6 Sharia Mohammed Said Pasha, Gianacis; adult/student E£10/5; 🕒 9am-1.30pm & 5-9pm Sat-Thu) presents about 40 of his works housed in the beautiful Italianate villa in which he once lived.

To get here take tram 2 from Midan Ramla to the San Stefano stop, then cross the tracks and go up the steps to the raised road. Go right and Sharia Mohammed Said Pasha is a short distance on the left.

MONTAZAH PALACE GARDENS

Khedive Abbas Hilmy (1892–1914) built Montazah as his summer palace, a refuge when Cairo became too hot. Sited on a rocky bluff overlooking the sea, it's designed in a pseudo-Moorish style, which has been given a Florentine twist with the addition of a tower modelled on one at the Palazzo Vecchio. Now used by Egypt's president, the palace is off limits to the public but the surrounding lush groves and **gardens** (Map pp372-3; admission E£5), planted with pine and palms, are accessible. They're popular with courting couples and picnicking locals. There's also an attractive sandy cove here with a semiprivate beach (E£10 to use it, although it's not particularly clean), and an eccentric Victorian-style bridge running out to a small island. If you ignore the fast-food restaurants, it makes a pleasant escape from the city-centre's traffic and build-up. A second royal residence, known as the Salamlek and built in an Austrian style, has now been converted into a luxury hotel (see p386).

The simplest way to get here is to stand on the Corniche or on Tariq al-Horreyya and flag down a microbus; when it slows, shout 'Montazah' and if it's going that way (and most of them are), it'll stop and you can jump on.

Souqs

Although you won't find the sort of antediluvian bazaars that you do in Cairo, Alexandria has several busy *souqs* (markets) that are ideal spots for people-gazing. **Souq Ibrahimyya** (Map pp372-3; Sharia Omar Lofty) is one of our favourite little markets in town for peeking into daily Egyptian life as it goes about its business. Down several tiny, covered side streets near the Sporting Club, it's packed to the brim with bright fruits and vegetables, piles of still-wet seafood, and stalls selling all kinds of clucking poultry and meats, both before and after they've seen the butcher's block. It's best in the morning when the vendors are at their most vocal and enthusiastic.

For a city that devours more fish than a hungry seal, you'd expect to find a pretty impressive fish market – and Alexandria delivers. The **fish market** (Map pp380-1; Qasr Ras at-Tin) at the northern tip of Anfushi bustles daily with flapping seafood that's literally just been thrown off the boat. Here, overalled vendors belt out the prices of their wares, while ever-sceptical buyers prod the merchandise and ponder the quality of the catch of the day. Be sure to get here early when the market is at its bustling best, as things die down by midmorning.

At the southwestern corner of Midan Tahrir, the battered, grand architecture switches scale to something more intimate as you enter the city's main **souq district** (Map pp380-1). Sharia Nokrashi runs for about a kilometre and is one long, heaving bustle of produce, fish and meat stalls, bakeries, cafés and sundry shops selling every imaginable household item. Sharia Fransa begins with cloth, clothes and dressmaking accessories. The tight weave of covered alleys running off to the west are known as Zinqat as-Sittat, or 'the alley of the women'. Here you'll find buttons, braid, baubles, bangles, beads and much more, from junk jewellery to frighteningly large padded bras. Beyond the haberdashery you will find the gold and silver dealers, then herbalists and spice vendors.

Beaches

There are plenty of public and private beaches along Alexandria's waterfront, but the ones between the Eastern Harbour and Montazah are often crowded and very grubby. **Mamoura Beach** (Map pp372-3), about 1km east of Montazah, is slightly better – it even has a few small waves rolling in. The local authorities

SHIPBUILDING, THE OLD WAY

Alexandria's importance as a strategic port is intertwined with its history as a city, with the ships of countless empires docking here over several thousand years. From humble beginnings of the papyrus-reed boats of ancient Egypt, to today's steel-hulled monoliths, shipbuilding has played a pivotal role in this harbour city's personality.

While steel and fibreglass construction techniques dominate the modern shipbuilding industry, more traditional methods of construction remain in Alexandria. At the **ship yards** (Map pp380-1; Qasr Ras at-Tin) at the northern end of Anfushi, yacht's are still constructed by hand and made entirely from wood. Along this stretch of coast lie dozens of yachts in various stages of completion, many with the slick modern designs more reminiscent of their fibreglass cousins. Here, skeletal wooden hulls of three-storey vessels tower over the sand like beached dinosaur exhibits and dozens of smaller craft compete with them for beach space. In between curving hulls, small shacks line the beach housing building materials, many with artisans specialising in particular components, such as intricately carved helms (steering wheels) and fine cabinets. It's a fascinating place to wander around and appreciate the sort of craftsmanship that has been replaced by industrial machinery in other parts of the world.

are trying to keep this beach suburb exclusive by charging everyone who enters the area E£5; but then there's a further fee of E£20 to get onto the sand. Women should note that even here modesty prevails and we recommend covering up when swimming – wear a baggy T-shirt and shorts over your swimsuit. To get here jump in an Abu Qir-bound microbus at Midan al-Gomhuriyya – make sure that the driver knows you want Mamoura.

ACTIVITIES

If you're willing to get wet, the bay of Alexandria hides untold archaeological riches underwater that can be explored by keen divers (see the boxed text, p376).

If you prefer to keep your head above water, you can zoom around the bay on a jet-ski rented from **Grand Marine Water Sports** (Map pp380-1; ☎ 012 222 5555; Corniche, Anfushi; ☎ 10am-sunset). Rentals range from E£300 to E£450 per hour, though you'd be well advised to keep your mouth shut – the water in the bay is far from hygienic.

If the unhurried trams of Alexandria aren't quite slow and relaxed enough for you, you can take it down another notch by getting a **horse-drawn carriage** ride. Popular during the summer months, these Victorian-style carriages clip-clop their way along the Corniche and are happy to take you to the major tourist attractions. A sunset trip along the waterfront could be quite romantic if it wasn't for the occasional blaring horns of taxis and minibuses trying to get past. Expect to pay around E£50 to E£80 per hour.

COURSES

If you want to take classes in Arabic, the **Qortoba Institute for Arabic Studies** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 556 2959, 010 584 3438; www.qortoba.com/alex; cnr Muhammad Nabeel Hamdy & Khalid Bin Waleed, Miami; ☎ 9am-4pm Sun-Thu) arranges private tuition for €4 to €4.50 per hour. Classes and schedules can be tailored for absolute beginners or more experienced speakers. It's quite a trek out here from the city centre, but if you're serious about study, the institute can arrange accommodation nearby in student apartments for US\$130 to \$160 per month.

SLEEPING

As Alexandria has had an overhaul, the accommodation scene is also slowly getting better. While several five-star hotel chains are setting up shop, hotels in the midrange category are still few and far between. Budget places run the whole gamut from downright seedy to pretty darn comfortable, but the selection from here mostly shoots straight into the US\$100 a night top-end category.

The summer months of June to September are the high season in Alexandria, when half of Cairo seems to decamp here to escape the heat of the capital. At the peak of the season, in August, you may have difficulty finding a room at some of the more popular hotels.

Budget & Midrange

Quite a few of the budget hotels front at least partly onto the Corniche – one of the pleasures of staying in Alexandria is pushing open

the shutters in the morning to get a face full of fresh air off the Mediterranean.

Hotel Acropole (Map p374; ☎ 480 5980; acropole_hotel@yahoo.com; 4th fl, 1 Sharia Gamal ad-Din Yassin; d E£35-55, s/d with shared bathroom E£65/75) At the bottom of the rung, the Acropole is very run down these days, the rooms are shabby and the management seems a bit blasé about the whole endeavour. Some rooms have a side glimpse of the harbour, though, and others have a good view over Midan Saad Zaghloul. Tram noises ('bucking, clicking' as Durrell described it) are thrown in for free.

Triomphe Hotel (Map p374; ☎ 487 1787; 3rd fl, Sharia Gamal ad-Din Yassin; s/d with shared bathroom E£50/70) This old-timer has managed to cling to some shreds of its faded grace: the rooms are old but well maintained and not without a lick of charm. There's a comfortable communal sitting area and immaculate shared bathrooms but no real sea views. A few rooms are also available with private bathrooms for E£20 extra, and fans cost E£5 more. Breakfast not included.

Nile Excelsior Hotel (Map p374; ☎ 480 0799; Nile_hotel@yahoo.com; 16 Sharia al-Bursa al-Qadima; s/d E£60/100, with air-con E£100/180; ☞) Very central hotel on the same street as the Spitfire Bar (handy for stumbling to bed). The stairs up to the hotel are rather dirty and uninviting, but the small rooms have high ceilings and fly the 'clean and comfortable' flag with pride.

New Capri Hotel (Map p374; ☎ 480 9310; 8th fl, 23 Sharia el-Mena al-Sharkya; s/d with shared bathroom E£62/81, s/d E£75/136) This hotel has made a valiant attempt at sprucing itself up, with a whiff of arabesque-style décor and the occasional gilded mirror or carved wooden chair. The large, bright rooms are straightforward, squeaky clean and many have views of the water. The dining room is particularly impressive – with gusty vistas of the bay. A solid sleeping option.

Hotel Union (Map p374; ☎ 480 7312; 5th fl, 164 Sharia 26th of July; s E£70-140, d E£90-160; ☞) While this used to be our budget place of choice in Alexandria, the Union let it go to its head a bit – with standards slipping and prices creeping up. The smallish rooms are still quite charming, relatively well maintained and come in a bewildering mix of bathroom/view/air-con options and rates. Our rates quoted include a Byzantine mix of taxes, but no breakfast.

Hotel Crillon (Map p374; ☎ 480 0330; 3rd fl, 5 Sharia Adib Ishaq; s/d E£72/99) Two blocks west from the Cecil Hotel, the Crillon is a poster child for

what all budget hotels should be. The staff are friendly and attentive, there are big, glistening rooms and regular renovations just keep the improvements rolling in. Some rooms have polished wooden floors and French windows that open onto balconies with that great harbour view, and we particularly love the pre-Revolutionary reception-lounge area. Reservations recommended.

Sea Star Hotel (Map p374; ☎ 487 1787; 24 Sharia Amin Fikry; s/d Jun-Sep E£120/170, Oct-May E£75/100; ☞) Don't let the sketchy-looking corridors put you off, this reliable hotel boasts speckless and tidy accommodation. All abodes come with TV and cost the same regardless of their size or the quality of the view – be sure to take a gander at several options.

Swiss Canal Hotel (Map p374; ☎ 480 8373; 14 Al-Bursa al-Qadima; s/d E£78/90, with air-con E£100/130; ☞) A true *Cinderella* story, this little establishment is fresh from a transformational makeover that would make the stepsisters squirm. The bright upstairs rooms have whimsically pink walls, oodles of fresh pine trim and range from small and cute to huge, bright and airy. Don't be tempted by the discount unrenovated rooms – they're icky.

Egypt Hotel (Map p374; ☎ 481 4483; 1 Degla; s E£250-320, d E£290-350; ☞) The new kid on the block, the Egypt singlehandedly fills a desperate niche for decent midrange digs. The rooms are super-comfy, with lush beds and lots of frilly period touches thrown in for good measure. All have perfectly neat bathrooms, and either sea or street views, and there's a homy sitting room filled with antique-ish furniture. Best of all, the staff are all bright eyed and bushy tailed.

Top End

Metropole Hotel (Map p374; ☎ 486 1467; www.paradiseinegypt.com; 52 Sharia Saad Zaghloul; s US\$100-135, d US\$120-155; ☞ ☑) Location, location, location! The Metropole sits right in the thick of things, with most rooms overlooking the Midan Ramla or Midan Saad Zaghloul and the Mediterranean. It's a classy old joint, entirely renovated in the 1990s to earn its four-star stripes. The lobby is rather overdone, but high-ceilinged rooms are more tasteful and ooze character, while the staff are meticulously polite.

Windsor Palace Hotel (Map p374; ☎ 480 8123; www.paradiseinegypt.com; Sharia ash-Shohada; s US\$125-135, d US\$145-155; ☞ ☑) This bejewelled Edwardian gem is an institution unto itself, towering over the Corniche and keeping a watchful eye on

the Med since 1907. In the 1990s the Windsor was bought by Paradise Inn, after its success with the Metropole, and given a much-needed nip and tuck. Thankfully the wonderful old elevators and grand lobby have been retained, and the rooms boast the sort of old-world, green- and gold-flavoured pizzazz that wouldn't be out of place on the *Orient Express*. The pricier rooms have splendid sea views.

Salamlek Palace Hotel (Map pp372-3; ☎ 547 7999; www.sangiovanni.com; Montazah Palace Gardens; d US\$200; 🏠) Khedive Abbas II must have really been smitten when he decided to build this former royal hunting lodge for his Austrian mistress, right next door to the presidential summer palace in the Montazah Gardens. The building looks like a rich Viennese pastry and the rooms are opulently furnished in swanky period style. The hotel boasts the only casino in town, a private beach and two international restaurants (ties required). The park setting is fantastic, but it's a long way to the city centre (a 30- to 45-minute drive) and the service can be a over-starched and painfully slow.

Cecil Hotel (Map p374; ☎ 487 7173; www.softel.com; 16 Midan Saad Zaghloul; s/d US\$205/245, with sea view US\$265/306) The historical Cecil Hotel, an Alexandria legend (see p378) now managed by the international Sofitel chain, has been refitted several times over the last couple of decades. Sometimes for the better. The rooms are fully equipped, though a little sombre, while the grand lobby and famous bar (now relocated to the 1st floor) have retained only a fraction of the lustre they had when Durrell and Churchill came to visit. To that extent the Cecil very much reflects the city in which it stands, where the past has to be imagined. The big consolation is the sweeping view over the Eastern Harbour.

ourpick Four Seasons Hotel (Map pp372-3; ☎ 581 8080; www.fourseasons.com/alexandria; Corniche, San Stefano; s/d from US\$320/350, ste US\$800-9000; 🏠 📺 📶) The most luxurious place to doff your hat in Alexandria, the new five-star Four Seasons sings an ode to decadence. It's sumptuously finished and will leave you wanting for nothing: the gleaming marble lobby is chilled to perfection; the army of staff are zealous to please; and rooms are generous, filled with period furniture and come with all the modern conveniences (suites even have flat-screen TVs in the bathroom – now that's convenient). There are several restaurants, a 3rd-floor infinity pool overlooking the ocean, and to top it all off a tunnel is being dug

under the Corniche to a private beach and an exclusive marina where one can dock one's Mediterranean yacht if one so wishes.

EATING

The old and once-grand restaurants, such as Pastroudis and the Union, have long closed, leaving central Alexandria something of a culinary wilderness. Western-style cooking is now often found in upmarket hotels and noisy shopping malls where Alexandrians love to hang out. Still, one of the delights in old Alexandria is to eat the freshest catch from the Mediterranean in one of the seafood restaurants overlooking the Eastern Harbour. Equally enjoyable is to stroll around the city centre, where you can sit in one of its many cafés and watch Alexandrians at play. Many restaurants don't serve alcohol.

Restaurants

CENTRAL ALEXANDRIA

Elite (Map p374; ☎ 486 3592; 43 Sharia Safiyya Zaghloul; dishes ££4.50-30; 🍷) 9am-midnight) Near the Cinema Metro, this is one of those Alexandria time-warp affairs. Cut from the same cloth as an old US diner, it seems sealed in a 1950s bubble, now almost slipping back in time. The menu traverses from the oriental to the occidental and tries to cover everything in between, though it's best to stick to the simple things. The big, street-facing windows make it a great place for an afternoon beer.

Taverna (Map p374; ☎ 487 8591; Saad Zaghloul; medium pizza ££12.50-18.50; 🍷) While its plucky menu tries to take on the whole culinary spectrum, with pasta dishes, pies, sandwiches and *shwarma* (meat off the pit, tomatoes and garnish in pita), most people know that the wood-fired pizzas are really what it's all about – hand thrown and thin crust. Along with its spotless interior, the Taverna is a deservedly popular hit with Alexandrian families.

China House (Map p374; ☎ 487 7173; Cecil Hotel, 16 Midan Saad Zaghloul; meals ££16-70; 🍷) 11am-11.30pm; 🍷) The prime views over the Eastern Harbour just don't get any better than here, Alexandria's best Chinese restaurant (although admittedly there is little competition). Chicken dumplings are first rate, as is the grilled beef with garlic. Its decent selection of Japanese dishes will have you fumbling for your chopsticks. Beer and Egyptian wine is served.

ourpick Hood Gondol Seafood (Map pp380-1; ☎ 476 1779; cnr Omar Lofty & Mohammed M Motwe; meals

around £25) When Alexandrians need a quick fix of delicious, fresh and ridiculously cheap seafood, they make a beeline for this local favourite near the Bibliotheca Alexandria. A massive plate of mixed seafood, including prawns, calamari, spicy clams and fried fish, as well as salads and bread, will barely make a dint in your wallet at £25. There's no menu and little English is spoken here, just turn up, point to the trays of fresh fish lining the downstairs display and find yourself a seat. It's located down an unmarked alley; ask for directions as everyone knows it by name.

Malek as-Samaan (Map pp380-1; ☎ 390 0698; off Sharia Attareen, Attareen; two birds £25; 🕒 8pm-3am) Just south of the junction with Sharia Yousef, by day this is a small courtyard clothes market, by night an open-air restaurant serving just one dish: quail. Diners sit under an awning on a rough dirt floor and tuck into grilled or stuffed birds served with rice and salad. A bit hard to find, but look for a painted sign with a small bird.

ANFUSHI

For some authentic Alexandrian flavour and atmosphere, head for the simple good-value, streetside restaurants in Anfushi's *baladi* (working-class) district. Sharia Safar Pasha is lined with a dozen places where the fires are crackling and flaming under the grills barbecuing meat and fish. You could chance a table at any of them and probably come away satisfied, but those listed here deserve a special mention.

El-Sheikh Wafik (Map pp372-3; ☎ 010 279 9570; Qasr Ras at-Tin; desserts £3-9; 🕒 24hr) This unassuming and breezy corner café has a secret – the best dessert in town. You can get the usual ice cream in several flavours, but the real treats are Egyptian classics such as *couscousy* (£8) – a yummy mix of couscous, shredded coconut, nuts, raisins, sugar and topped with hot milk.

Housnay Grill (Map pp380-1; Sharia Safar Pasha, Bahari; dishes ££20-40) If you're a little fished out in Anfushi, Housnay Grill, opposite Abu Ashraf, is a semioutdoor restaurant specialising in tasty grilled chicken, kebabs and other meats, served with the usual triumvirate of vegetables, salad and rice.

Abu Ashraf (Map pp380-1; ☎ 481 6597; 28 Sharia Safar Pasha, Bahari; dishes ££35-60; 🕒 24hr) One of this street's fish specialists, make your selection from the day's catch then take a seat under the

green awning and watch it being cooked. Sea bass stuffed with garlic and herbs is a speciality, as is the creamy prawn *kishk* (casserole). Price is determined by weight and type of fish, ranging from grey mullet at ££40 per kilo to jumbo prawns at ££150.

Qadoura (Map pp380-1; ☎ 480 0405; 33 Sharia Bairam at-Tonsi; meals ££35-80; 🕒 9am-3am) Pronounced 'Adora', this is one of Alexandria's most authentic fish restaurants. Pick your fish from a huge ice-packed selection, which usually includes sea bass, red and grey mullet, bluefish, sole, squid, crab and prawns, and often a lot more. Food is served at tables in the narrow street. A selection of mezza is served with all orders (don't hope for a menu). Most fish is around ££40 to ££80 per kilo, prawns ££180 per kilo. It has a second, air-conditioned (though less atmospheric) branch along the Corniche.

Samakmak (Map pp380-1; ☎ 481 1560; 42 Qasr Ras at-Tin; dishes ££40-90; 🍷) Owned by Zizi Salem, the retired queen of the Alexandrian belly-dancing scene, Samakmak is definitely one step up from the other fish eateries in the neighbourhood. The fish is as fresh as elsewhere, but customers flock to this place for its specials, including crayfish, marvellous crab *tagen* (stew cooked in a deep clay pot) and a great spaghetti with clams.

Fish Market (Map pp380-1; ☎ 480 5119; Corniche, beside the Kashafa Club, Bahari; dishes ££50-80; 🕒 noon-2am; 🍷) Well-heeled locals will argue that this is the best place to eat in town, and who are we to argue with local knowledge? It's definitely the most upmarket fish restaurant in Alexandria, with prime views over the Eastern Harbour and flashy silver service where you can pick your own seafood and have it cooked to perfection in the way you desire. The same owners run the Tikka Grill (☎ 480 5114), on the floor below, which offers a similar dining experience for the meatarians among you.

RUSHDY

Centro de Portugal (Map pp372-3; ☎ 542 7599; 42 Sharia Abd al-Kader, off Sharia Kafr Abduh; admission £10, dishes ££40-55; 🕒 6pm-1am; 🍷) The Portuguese Club is a favourite with local expats, a place where American petrol workers get together over a beer or game of snooker. With a rowdy, male-centric atmosphere, it serves the best steak and fries in town, as well as other international cuisine, and has a pleasant garden.

SMOUSA

Cordon Rouge (Map pp372-3; ☎ 420 8666; Green Plaza Mall, 14th of Mai St; dishes E£45-90; ☎ noon-2am; ♿) Lively bar-restaurant in a contemporary setting, popular with Alexandrians and expats who pop up the bar and chat to the cool barman, or grab a bite at the Mediterranean-style restaurant. The international menu focuses on salads, pasta dishes and grills. A live DJ pumps up the volume on Thursday night.

Quick Eats

The place for cheap eats is around the corner of Sharia Safiyya Zaghloul and Midan Ramla. There are plenty of little *fuul* and *ta'amiyya* places here as well as sandwich shops.

Gad (Map p374; Saad Zaghloul, also Mohammed Azmy; snacks E£1-9; ☎ 24hr) Egypt's answer to McDonalds (although a vast improvement), this chain of absurdly popular takeaway joints has people flocking (think Gad-flies) day and night. It serves a huge range of filled sandwiches, kebabs, *ta'amiyya* and mouth-watering *shwarma*.

Awalad Abdou (Map p374; Sharia Yousef; sandwiches E£2-3; ☎ 24hr) With only minor concessions made to hygiene, this überbudget place is nonetheless a smashing find. In two shakes of a lamb's tail, these guys will whip up micro sandwiches with a scrumptious, meat-centric filling of your choice. Just point to what looks good and quaff it down while standing at the counter. During Ramadan, after sundown, the street outside swarms with hungry punters.

Mohammed Ahmed (Map p374; ☎ 483 3576; 17 Sharia Shakor Pasha; dishes E£2-5) The king of *fuul* and *ta'amiyya* has a widespread reputation that has Alexandrians queuing here to fill that gap in their stomachs. There's a menu in English, which, in addition to sandwiches, includes other staples such as omelettes and fried cheese. Sit in or takeaway.

El-Qobesi (Map pp380-1; ☎ 486 7860; 51 Corniche; juices E£3-6; ☎ 24hr) El-Qobesi has crowned itself the 'king of mango', but take one sip and you will bow down a loyal peon. Slivers of several ripe mangoes are cajoled nearly whole into a tall, chilled glass to make the single best mango juice we've ever tried. Ever. It's open 'round the clock and is always bustling, often with locals parked outside for a quick in-car slurp (we've even seen full minibuses stop by!). It's not signposted in English – but you can't miss the thousands of mangoes arranged out the front.

Al-Shark (Map p374; Sharia al-Bursa al-Qadima, opposite Nile Excelsior Hotel; main courses E£40-15.50) Extremely popular Egyptian eatery with traditional dishes, such as Egyptian baked macaroni, rice with gizzards, *fatta* (dish involving rice and bread soaked in a garlicky-vinegary sauce) with mutton and grilled kebab by the kilo. Simple surroundings and quick service. There's a takeaway and sit-down area.

Self-Catering

For fruit and vegetables, either head for Sharia Nokrashi in the Souq District (Map pp380-1) just west off Midan Tahrir, or the Souq Ibrahimiyya (Map pp372-3), which is a couple of stops east of Midan Ramla on any tram – get off at the Al-Moaskar stop. These two areas are also good for *ba'als* (groceries) where you can get cheese, olives, yogurt, bread and the like. The Alexandria **Carrefour City Center Mall** (Map pp372-3beginning of the Cairo Desert Rd) has a large Carrefour supermarket, but it's way out of the city centre.

DRINKING Cafés

Different worlds came together and mingled in the cafés of Alexandria for hundreds of years. For an introduction to some of the more historically seasoned cafés, see the boxed text, p390. Today Alexandrians prefer modern Western-style cafés, such as the ones listed here.

Bistrot (Map p374; ☎ 486 9061; 6 Sharia Fuad; ♿) A modern venue with decent coffee, fresh juices, good pasta dishes, salads and sandwiches, and a pastry corner for breakfast. The décor is simple but has character and there is a terrace in the shade for alfresco lunches – it's often busy with flirty young couples playing footsies.

Coffee Roastery (Map p374; ☎ 483 4363; 48 Sharia Fuad; ☎ 7am-2am; ♿) The hip young things that flock here to listen to MTV blaring on the telly don't seem to mind that the English proverbs around the place make little sense. It's one of the more ritzy places in town, bedecked in dark-wood trim and with a food menu that could have been lifted from an English pub: burgers, steak and fries dominate the choices among token references to Egyptian fare. It also does great coffee, milk shakes and fresh juices.

City Café (Map p374; ☎ 484 7994; 21 Salah Salem; ☎ 9am-12pm; ♿) A slick, bright and modern air-con alternative to musty-time grandeur,

A MAGICAL HYSTORY (CAFFEINATED) TOUR

In case you hadn't noticed, Alexandria is a café town – and we're not talking Starbucks double-decaf-soy-low-fat-vanilla-grande latte's here. Ever since the first half of the 20th century, Alexandria's culture has centred around these venues, where the city's diverse population congregated to live out life's dramas over pastries and a cup of tea or coffee. Famous literary figures met here, chatted and pondered the city they could not quite grasp. Many of these old haunts remain and are definitely worth a visit for nostalgic purposes, historical associations and grand décor, but not always for the food or drink.

As good a place start as any is by grabbing your first coffee of the day at **Athneos** (Map p374; ☎ 487 7173; 21 Midan Saad Zaghloul) opposite Midan Ramla. This place lives and breathes nostalgia. The café part on the Midan Ramla side still has its original '40s fittings, period character and quite possibly some of its original customers – a loyal following of old men drinking tea who haven't moved for decades. Come for the history, skip the food.

Also facing Midan Ramla is **Trianon** (Map p374; 56 Midan Saad Zaghloul; ☎ from 7am; ☺), a favourite haunt of the Greek poet Cavafy, who worked in offices on the floor above. You can stop here for a while to grab one of its decent Continental-style breakfasts, but give the adjoining restaurant a wide berth as it's seen better days.

After you polish off breakfast, walk around the corner to check out **Delicieux** (Map p374; 46 Sharia Saad Zaghloul, Attareen; ☎ from 7am; ☺). This enormous old tearoom drips with atmosphere and it, too, can whip up a decent breakfast. It serves tea and cakes in the afternoon. If you're starting to tire, pop in next door for a strong kick-start espresso at the counter (no seats) of old java haunt **Brazilian Coffee Store** (Map p374; Sharia Saad Zaghloul; ☺). Popular with local business folk and old Greek men, it also has a branch on Sharia Salah Salem in Attareen (with seats).

Now don't you think you've earned a dessert? **Vinous** (Map p374; ☎ 486 0956; cnr Al-Nabi Daniel & Tariq al-Horreyya; ☎ 7am-1am) is an old-school patisserie with more grand Art Deco-styling than you can poke a puff-pastry at, but secretly we love it for the period scales labelled with the 'Just' brand. From here you can make a historical detour (to work off those extra calories you just imbibed) to the place where the famous **Pastroudis** (Map p374; Tariq al-Horreyya) once stood. Though now closed, this was a frequent meeting point for the characters of Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*.

Finally, exhausted, you might just need one last pick-me-up coffee. Head over to Sharia Saad Zaghloul for the **Sofianopoulo Coffee Store** (Map p374; Sharia Saad Zaghloul), a gorgeous coffee retailer that would be in a museum anywhere else in the world. Dominated by huge silver coffee grinders and sacks of shiny, dark aromatic coffee beans, it's the perfect place to grab one last, expertly prepared, espresso at its standing-only bar.

this café serves excellent Italian Illy coffee and is popular among the well heeled to sit and chat or discuss business.

Ahwas

Alexandria has nothing like the density of *ahwas* (coffeehouses) found in Cairo, but during summer the whole 20km length of the Corniche from Ras at-Tin to Montazah becomes one great strung-out coffeehouse. With a few exceptions, these are not the greatest places – they're catering for a passing holiday trade and so they tend to overcharge.

Sultan Hussein (Map p374; cnr Sharia Safiyya Zagh-loul & Sharia Sultan Hussein) One of our favourite Alexandrian *ahwas*, this is a good,

no-nonsense place with first-rate *sheesha*. It is popular with chess players and has a separate family area where women can sit unharassed.

Ahwa al-Hind (Map pp380-1; Midan Tahrir) You have to squeeze through a passageway almost blocked by clothes stalls to find this *ahwa* in the central courtyard of the big, battered old building on the corner where Midan Orabi meets Midan Tahrir. It's scruffy, but the setting bristles with atmosphere and is the perfect place to while away a hot afternoon or lazy evening.

Bars

Sixty years ago, pre-Revolution, Alexandria was thriving with Greek tavernas and divey

little watering holes. Sadly, today only a few fine places survive. **Cap d'Or** (Map p374; ☎ 487 5177; 4 Sharia Adbi Bek Ishak; ☎ 10am-3am) The Cap d'Or, just off Sharia Saad Zaghloul, is a top spot to relax, and one of the only surviving typical Alexandrian bars. With beer flowing generously, stained-glass windows, a long marble-topped bar, plenty of ancient memorabilia decorating the walls and crackling tapes of old French *chanson* (type of traditional folk music) or Egyptian hits, it feels very much like an Andalusian tapas bar. Crowds come to drink cold Stella beer, snack on great seafood, or just hang out at the bar and chew the proverbial fat with fellow drinkers. Thursday and Friday nights are more 'open minded' than most nights in Alexandria.

our pick **Greek Club** (Club Nautique Hellenique; Map pp380-1; ☎ 480 2690; Corniche, Anfushi; admission ££6; ☎ noon-11pm) The Greek Club is the perfect place for a sunset drink, inside its large newly restored rooms or, even better, on the wide terrace catching the afternoon breeze or watching the lights on this legendary bay. The beers are cold and the atmosphere is perfectly Mediterranean. The menu has a selection of fresh fish cooked any way you like it (grilled with olive oil, oregano and lemon, baked or Egyptian style), as well as Greek classics such as moussaka (££14) and souvlaki (££32).

Spitfire (Map p374; 7 Sharia L' Ancienne Bourse; ☎ noon-1am Mon-Sat) Just north of Sharia Saad Zaghloul, Spitfire feels almost like a Bangkok bar – sans go-go girls. It has a reputation as a sailors' hang-out and the walls are plastered with shipping-line stickers, rock-and-roll memorabilia and photos of drunk regulars. It's a great place for an evening out in one of the world's finest harbours, listening to American rock and roll from the 1970s.

El-Yunani (Map pp372-3; ☎ 592 0026; Sharia Memphis; ☎ noon-midnight) Near Souq Ibrahimiyya, this Greek taverna is the poor-man's version of the posher Greek Club (opposite). With baby-blue walls covered in faded 1960s Greek tourism posters and slow-turning fans, it clings to musty remnants of allure. Look for the bumble-bee striped pillars at the entrance.

You can also grab a beer at **Centro de Portugal** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 542 7599; 42 Sharia Abd al-Kader, off Sharia Kafr Abduh; admission ££10; ☎ 6pm-1am; ☎) and **Elite** (Map p374; ☎ 486 3592; 43 Sharia Safiyya Zaghloul; ☎ 9am-midnight). Takeaway beer is available in the city centre at the aptly named **Drinkies** (Map p374; ☎ 19330; Al-Ghorfa at-Tigariya; ☎ noon-midnight), below the Hotel Acropole. It also delivers.

ENTERTAINMENT

Alexandria's cultural life has never really recovered from the exodus of Europeans

BUSINESS THROUGH A PUFF OF SMOKE

Although it may not look like much to the uninitiated (it doesn't even sport a sign), **El-Tugareya** (Map p374; Corniche; ☎ 9am-late) is one of the most important *ahwas* (coffeehouses) in Alexandria. This 90-year-old institution has been an informal centre of business and trade for much of that time (its name roughly translates to 'commerce'), where deals are brokered in the time-honoured tradition – over a glass of tea.

The café is separated into two parts. On the eastern side of the block is a male-dominated area dedicated to games and informal socialising, where old timers slap down backgammon pieces with rambunctious gusto. The other side of the block, closer to Midan Orabi, is where Alexandrian's have traditionally come to discuss contracts, haggle over agreements and dissect the politics of the day. Taking its role in the history of the city's business community seriously, El-Tugareya has evolved special, unwritten rules: only tea, coffee and *sheesha* are served; standing is not allowed (to prevent heated discussions getting too out of hand); and customers' privacy is always respected (anything seen or overheard by staff is kept in the strictest confidence). El-Tugareya's time-honoured customs mean that, these days, wheeling and dealing customers are rarely alone as locals from all walks of life flock here to meet and discuss the issues of the day in relative freedom.

This place is well worth a visit – on any given evening you're likely to see writers, film makers, poets, students, expats, courting young couples and liberal-minded revolutionaries of all stripes filling its hall with a cacophony of animated conversation. Look for the café with the green window trim.

and Jews in the 1940s and '50s, but in recent years things have started to change for the better. Since the opening of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, the town is once again trying to compete with Cairo as the proprietor of Egyptian arts.

The **Alexandria International Film Festival** takes place every September, offering Alexandrians a rare opportunity to see uncensored films from around the globe. Films are screened at several cinemas around town – ask at the tourist office for more information.

Cinemas

The following cinemas often screen English-language films.

Amir Cinema (Map p374; ☎ 391 7972; 42 Tariq al-Horreyya) A refitted grand old cinema now with six screens, showing almost exclusively Hollywood tripe.

Cinema Metro (Map p374; ☎ 487 0432; 26 Sharia Safiyya Zaghoul) Situated in central Alexandria, this beautiful old place has been very well looked after – pity the movies it screens are often so uninspired.

Green Plaza Mall Cineplex (Map pp372-3; ☎ 420 9155; 14th Mai St, Smouha) This large cinema, part of the buzzing Green Plaza Mall complex, has six screens all showing first-run American blockbusters. A taxi out here will cost about ££10 and take 25 minutes from the city centre.

Renaissance San Stefano (Map pp372-3; ☎ 469 0056; 2nd fl, San Stefano Mall, Sharia Abdel Salam Aref, San Stefano; tickets ££15-25; ☎ 1pm-1am) The newest screens in town, with eight spiffy cinemas showing mostly Hollywood offerings, it's currently the 'it' spot for young Alexandrians. A taxi from the city centre will cost about ££10.

Music, Theatre & Dance

The free monthly booklet *Alex Agenda*, available at many hotels, is extremely useful for its extensive list of concerts, theatre events and live gigs throughout Alexandria. The Elite restaurant (p387) usually posts notices advertising anything that's happening; alternatively see *Egypt Today*. Also, check the French Cultural Centre (p371) as it organises quite a few performances.

Alexandria Opera House (Map p374; ☎ 486 5106; 22 Tariq al-Horreyya) The former Sayyid Darwish Theatre has been refurbished and now houses the city's modestly proportioned but splendid opera house. Most performances of

opera and classical music are staged in this gorgeous auditorium.

Bibliotheca Alexandrina (Map pp380-1; ☎ 483 9999; www.bibalex.org; Corniche al-Bahr, Chatby) The Bibliotheca Alexandrina is the most important cultural venue in town now, hosting major music festivals, international concerts and performances.

Alexandria Centre of Arts (Map p374; ☎ 495 6633; 1 Tariq al-Horreyya) This place hosts twice-weekly concerts, but there is little going on in the way of theatre or music.

our pick Garage (Map pp372-3; tftouh@yafund.org; Jesuit Centre, Sharia Bur Said, Sidi Gaber) The renovated garage of the Jesuit Centre and maintained by the Young Arab Theatre Fund, Garage is a breath of fresh air on the city's cultural scene, presenting new performances by local and international youth theatre groups.

SHOPPING

There is a *souq* (Map pp380-1) just west of Midan Tahrir, and Sharia Safiyya Zaghoul and Sharia Saad Zaghoul are lined with an assortment of old-fashioned and more trendy clothes and shoe shops, but overall the city centre is not shopper's paradise. Alexandrians have only recently discovered the joys of shopping malls, but there is no stopping them now. Today malls have replaced town squares as popular gathering spots, boasting entertainment, cafés, *ahwas* and restaurants. Younger Alexandrians find them great places to mingle with the opposite sex.

Carrefour City Center Mall (Map pp372-3; beginning of the Cairo Desert Rd) A 20-minute drive south of the city, this is one of the largest malls, with the massive French superstore Carrefour. It sells everything from groceries to TVs.

Green Plaza Mall (Map pp372-3; 14th of Mai St, Smouha) Slightly older but still a big hit with locals is Green Plaza Mall, out beyond the suburb of Smouha on the Agricultural Rd to Cairo. It is about as kitsch as things get, a local shopping version of Disneyland, with shops and shops and shops plus a noisy funfair, snooker hall, bowling alley, food court, cineplex, Hilton hotel, and a gaudy 'Roman temple' that houses a conference and marriage centre.

San Stefano Mall (Map pp372-3; Sharia Abdel Salam Aref, San Stefano) The latest ode to international label shopping, this swanky mall sits behind the Four Seasons Hotel and has a big food court and cinemas. It is the

current place to see and be seen for chic young Alexandrians.

Antique collectors might have some fun diving through the confusion of backstreets and alleys of the Attareen district. When Alexandria's European high society was forced en masse to make a hasty departure from Egypt following the 1952 Revolution, they largely went without their personal belongings – much of what they left has found its way over the years into the Attareen Antique Market (Map p374). Today there are fewer and fewer wonderful finds, and even less bargains. Dealers here recognise quality and their bedtime reading may well include Christie's and Sotheby's catalogues.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

There are direct international flights from Alexandria to London (British Airways), Athens (Olympic Airways) and Frankfurt (Lufthansa), as well as most Middle Eastern capitals. Alexandria's airport **Burg al-Arab** (☎ 459 1483) is 60km west of the city. The air-con airport bus 555 (one-way E£6 plus E£1 per bag, one hour) leaves from in front of the Cecil Hotel (Map p374) on Midan Saad Zaghloul two hours before all departures. A taxi to/from the airport should cost no more than E£100.

There's a second smaller airport at **Nouzha** (Map pp372-3 ☎ 425 0527), much closer to the city, where some **Egypt Air** (Map374; ☎ 487 3357, 486 5937; 19 Midan Saad Zaghloul; ✈ 8am-8pm) and other flights land. Catch minibus 711 or 703 (50pt) from Midan Orabi or Midan Ramla. A taxi to/from the airport should cost no more than E£10 to E£15.

Bus

Long-distance buses now all leave from the one bus station in Moharrem Bay, **Al-Mo'af al-Gedid** (New Garage; Map pp372-3). It's several kilometres south of Midan Saad Zaghloul; to get there either catch a microbus from Misr Train Station (50pt), or grab a taxi from the city centre (E£10 to E£15).

The main companies operating from here are **West Delta Bus Co** (☎ 362 9685) and **Superjet** (☎ 363 3552), which has more expensive but considerably nicer buses. Also nearby are several little cabins for the East Delta Travel Company and Upper Egypt Bus Company ticket offices.

West Delta has a convenient city-centre **booking office** (Map p374; ☎ 480 9685; Midan Saad Zaghloul; ✈ 9am-10pm) close to the main tourist office. Superjet has a slightly less convenient **booking office** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 543 5222; ✈ 8am-11pm) opposite the Sidi Gaber Train Station.

CAIRO

Superjet has buses to Cairo (also stopping at Cairo airport) every hour from 5am to 10pm, plus a further service at 1am. The trip takes 2½ hours and costs around E£25; the fare to Cairo airport is E£35. West Delta also has buses to Cairo every 30 minutes between 5am and 2am (5.30am to 1am from October to April) and charges E£21 to E£25, and E£35 to the airport.

NORTH COAST & SIWA

West Delta has buses to Marsa Matruh (E£17 to E£30, four hours, around 20 daily) between 6am and 1.30am. Many of these buses continue on to Sallum (E£28, nine hours) on the border with Libya. Four services go to Siwa (E£27, nine hours) at 8.30am, 11am, 2pm and 10pm. Otherwise just take any Marsa Matruh bus and change there.

Most of the Marsa Matruh buses stop in El Alamein (one hour), and will stop at Sidi Abdel Rahman if you want to get off, though you will have to pay the full Matruh fare.

Superjet runs buses to Marsa Matruh (E£30) daily during summer (June to September) at 8am, 10am, 1pm, 3pm and 5.30pm.

SINAI

Superjet has a daily 9pm service to Sharm el-Sheikh (E£100, eight to 10 hours); West Delta has one at 9pm (E£80).

SUEZ CANAL & RED SEA COAST

Superjet has a daily service to Hurghada (E£85, nine hours) at 8pm. West Delta has several services a day to Port Said (E£22), two to Ismailia (E£25) at 7am and 2.30pm, and four to Suez (E£25) at 6am, 11am, 2.30pm and 5pm. It also has buses to Hurghada and Port Safaga at 9am and 6.30pm (E£85, six to eight hours). The Upper Egypt Bus Company has three daily Hurghada buses (E£75 to E£80) that continue on down to Port Safaga (E£60).

INTERNATIONAL BUSES

For information on international services from Alexandria, see p524.

Service Taxi & Microbus

Service taxis and microbuses for Abu Qir, and service taxis for Cairo, depart from outside Misr Train Station (Map pp380–1); all others go from the Al-Mo'af al-Gedid (New Garage; Map pp372–3) bus station out at Moharrem Bay. Fares cost E£15 to E£18 to Cairo or Marsa Matruh, depending on who you ask. To more local destinations, some sample fares are Zagazig E£10, Tanta E£8, Mansura E£10, Rosetta E£3 and Abu Qir E£1.

Train

There are two train stations in Alexandria. The main terminal is **Mahattat Misr** (Misr Train Station; Map pp380–1; ☎ 426 3207), about 1km south of Midan Ramla. **Mahattat Sidi Gaber** (Sidi Gaber Train Station; Map pp372–3; ☎ 426 3953) serves the eastern suburbs. Trains from Cairo stop at Sidi Gaber first, but the only reason to get off there is if you're staying in that part of town.

At Misr Train Station, 1st- and 2nd-class air-con tickets must be bought from the ticket office next to the Misr Train Station tourist office; 3rd-class and 2nd-class ordinary tickets are purchased from the front hall. Cairo-bound trains leave from here at least hourly, from 4.30am to 10pm, stopping five minutes later at Sidi Gaber Train Station. The best trains, the *Turbini* and *Espani*, don't stop again until 2½ hours later when they arrive in Cairo. They depart from Misr Train Station at 7am, 8am, 2pm, 3pm, 4.45pm, 7pm and 10.15pm. Tickets for 1st-/2nd-class air-con cost E£46/29.

The next-best train, the *Faransawi*, stop at Damanhur, Tanta and Benha, taking three hours to get to Cairo. It departs at 6am, 8.15am, 10am, 11am, 1pm, 3.30pm and 8pm and cost E£35/19 in 1st/2nd class.

From June to September a luxury sleeper train passes through Alexandria on its way from Cairo to Marsa Matruh (about six hours) at 1.30am; beds in double/private berths cost US\$45/60 (book in Alexandria on ☎ 393 2430). However, the bus service on this route is a more convenient and faster option.

GETTING AROUND

Bus & Minibus

As a visitor to Alexandria, you'll rarely use the buses – the trams and microbuses are a much better way of getting around. There are no set departure points or stops for microbuses, but most whizz by either Midan Saad Zaghloul or Midan Ramla and cost around

50pt for short trips. Just wave to flag one down and yell out your destination.

Car

For rental cars, visit **Avis** (Map p374; ☎ 485 7400; Cecil Hotel, 16 Midan Saad Zaghloul), though you'd have to be half-mad to try and take on Alexandria traffic on your own. Prices start at US\$38 per day and include the first 100km.

Taxi

There are no working meters in Alexandria. A short trip, say from Midan Ramla to Misr Train Station, will cost E£5; from the city centre to Fort Qaitbey E£5; from the city centre to the Royal Jewellery Museum or Mahmoud Said Museum E£15; and from the city centre to Montazah or Maamoura around E£25.

Train

About the only conceivable, but not recommended, service you might use in Alexandria is the very slow 3rd-class train (50pt) from Misr Train Station to Abu Qir. It stops, among many other places, at Sidi Gaber, Montazah and Maamoura, but only serious train buffs would consider taking it.

Tram

Tram is the best, if not slowest, way to travel in Alex. Mahattat Ramla is the main tram station and from here lime-yellow-coloured trams go west. Tram 14 goes to Misr Train Station and Moharrem Bey, and tram 15 goes past the Mosque of Abu Abbas al-Mursi and Fort Qaitbey to Ras at-Tin.

The blue-coloured trams travel east: trams 2 and 36 to Sidi Gaber, Rushdy and San Stefano; tram 36 to Victoria via Rushdy and San Stefano; and tram 25 from Ras at-Tin to Sidi Gaber via Midan Ramla.

Some trams have two or three carriages, in which case one of them is reserved for women. It causes considerable amusement when a poor unsuspecting foreigner gets in the wrong carriage. The standard fare is 25pt.

AROUND ALEXANDRIA

ABU QIR

Abu Qir (abu ear), a small coastal town 24km east of Alexandria, was slingshot into fame by several major 18th-century battles that

took place off its shores. The Battle of the Nile saw the British Admiral Horatio Nelson administer a crushing defeat over Napoleon's French fleet. Although Napoleon still controlled Egypt, his contact with France by sea was effectively severed. In 1799 the British landed 18,000 Turkish soldiers at Abu Qir, but with a thirst for revenge the French force of 10,000 men, mostly cavalry led personally by Napoleon, forced the Turks back into the sea, drowning at least 5000 of them. In 1801, however, the French lost a further battle with the British troops at the same place and the French expeditionary corps was then forced out of Egypt.

Recent underwater excavation (see the boxed text, p376) has revealed two sunken cities believed to be the legendary Herakleion and Menouthis, with several rescued treasures now on display at the Alexandria National Museum (p376). The beach here is rubbish strewn, so the main reason to head in this direction is for lunch at one of the excellent fish restaurants, particularly at the **Zephyrion** (☎ 03-562 1319; seafont Abu Qir; dishes ££25-90). This old Greek fish taverna (the name is Greek for 'sea breeze') was founded in 1929 and serves first-class fish and seafood on the sweeping blue-and-white terrace that overlooks the bay. There is no wine list but you can bring your own bottle and it will be uncorked for you without complaint.

There are plenty of buses from central Alexandria to Abu Qir daily (including buses 260 and 261 and minibus 729 from Midan Orabi), but it's probably easier to take microbus 728 from in front of Misr Train Station, microbus 729 from Midan Orabi or one of several minibuses from Al-Mo'af al-Gedid station for ££1.

ABU MINA

☎ 03 / pop 84,300

St Mina is said to have fallen victim to anti-Christian sentiment in the Roman Empire of the early 4th century. Born in West Africa, he did a stint in the Roman army before deserting and finally being tortured and beheaded for his faith. He was buried at a place near the present site of Abu Mina, which eventually became a place of pilgrimage. Churches and even a basilica were built, and all subsequently destroyed. In the 14th century a Mamluk army supposedly rediscovered the site and the bones of St Mina, which could

not be burned (proving to the Mamluks that they belonged to a saint).

A German team has been working at Abu Mina since 1969 (excavations have uncovered the early medieval Church of the Martyr, where St Mina's remains are believed to be buried), although at present the site is not open to visitors.

ROSETTA (AR-RASHID)

☎ 03 / pop 194,693

It's hard to believe that this dusty town, squatting on the western branch of the Nile 65km from Alexandria, was once Egypt's most significant port. Also known as Ar-Rashid, Rosetta was founded in the 9th century and outgrew Alexandria in importance during that town's 18th- and 19th-century decline. Alas, as Alexandria got back on its feet and regained its power in the late 19th century, Rosetta was thrust once again back into near irrelevance.

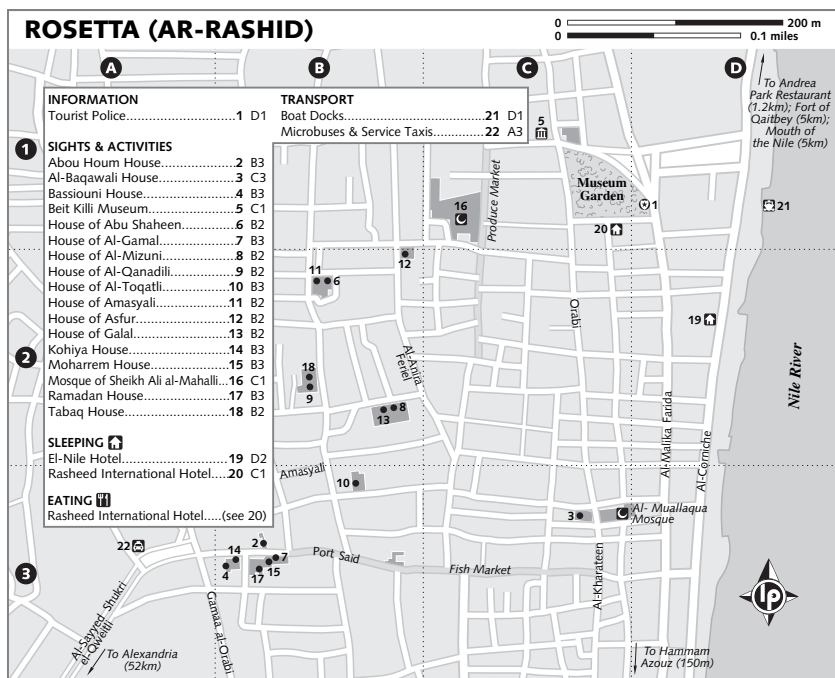
Today Rosetta is most famous as the discovery place of the stone stele that provided the key to deciphering hieroglyphics (see the boxed text, p397). The town makes a great detour from the modern turmoil of nearby Alexandria. The streets, though mostly unpaved, are packed with market stalls selling all manner of produce, and donkey carts outnumber cars in the nearly impassable, windy dirt streets. Rosetta is dotted with attractive Ottoman merchant houses, several of them restored and accessible to tourists. A boat trip is another reason to visit, as the Nile is particularly beautiful here, wide and full, with boat builders along the Corniche and loads of palms on the far bank.

Note that it's best to avoid Rosetta within days of any significant rain when the unsealed streets become one big, messy mud bath.

There is currently no tourist office in Rosetta, though the eager staff at the **tourist police** (Museum Garden) can point you in the right direction for the town's majors sights.

Sights

Rosetta's main draw are its beautifully crafted **Ottoman-era merchants' houses**. Built in the traditional Delta style using small, flat bricks painted alternately red and black, the three-storey structures are interesting in that the upper floor slightly overhangs the lower one. Together with their jutting and ornate *mashrabiyyas*, (the intricately assembled wooden screens that serve for windows), the



buildings are reminiscent of an upside-down chocolate wedding cake.

There are at least 22 of these impressive structures hiding along Rosetta's streets, though only a few have been restored and are open to the public. Some of the more impressive ones include the houses of Abou Houm, Al-Baqawali, Bassiouni, Al-Gamal, Al-Qanadili, Asfur, Kohiya, Moharrem, Galal and Tabaq. There are also 12 mosques within 500 sq metres, though many are not open to the public. Several old buildings are undergoing restoration work, and the three currently open to the public are the House of Amasyali (right), House of Abu Shaheen (opposite) and Hammam Azouz (opposite).

Tickets can be bought at the House of Amasyali, with each ticket good for all of the open monuments in the town centre, for E£12/6 per adult/student. Most houses will have a similar layout, so whichever one is open when you visit will be quite similar to the description of the House of Amasyali following.

The **Beit Killi museum** (per adult/student E£12/6), on the main square, off the Corniche, was

closed for restoration at the time of writing, but should be open by the time this book is published, though this deadline keeps getting extended.

HOUSE OF AMASYALI

One of the most impressive of all Rosetta's fine buildings is the **House of Amasyali** (☞ 9am-4pm), one of two restored houses on Al-Anira Ferial. The façade here is one of the most impressive in Rosetta, with beautiful small lantern lights and vast expanses of *mashrabiyya* screens, which circulate cool breezes around the house. Although inside it's devoid of furniture – as are all the buildings – it's still possible to get a clear idea of how the house worked. A series of rough stone chambers, which would have been used for storage, make up the ground floor. The 1st floor is for the men. One of the rooms here is a reception room, where guests would have been entertained by groups of musicians, and is overlooked by a screened wooden gallery behind which the women would have sat, obscured from view. The stair to the gallery is hidden behind a false cupboard and there are some fine examples of mother-of-pearl inlay

THE ROSETTA STONE

Now a crowd-pulling exhibit at the British Museum in London, the Rosetta Stone is the most significant find in the history of Egyptology. Unearthed in 1799 by a French soldier doing his duty improving the defences of Fort St Julien near Rosetta, the stone is the lower half of a large dark granitic stele. It records a decree issued by the priests of Memphis on 27 March 196 BC, the anniversary of the coronation of Ptolemy V (205–180 BC), and it announces their decision to honour the 13-year-old pharaoh with his own cult in return for tax exemptions and other perks. In order to be understood by Egyptians, Greeks and others then living in the country, the decree was written in the three scripts current at the time – hieroglyphic, demotic (a cursive form of hieroglyphs) and Greek, a language that European scholars would have read fluently. The trilingual inscription was set up in a temple beside a statue of the pharaoh. At the time of its discovery, much was known about ancient Egypt, but scholars had still not managed to decipher hieroglyphs. It was quickly realised that these three scripts would make it possible to compare identical texts and therefore to crack the code and recover the lost world of the ancient Egyptians.

When the British defeated Napoleon's army in 1801, they wrote a clause in the surrender document insisting that antiquities be handed to the victors, the Rosetta Stone being foremost among them. The French made a cast and the original was shipped to London, where Englishman Thomas Young established the direction in which the hieroglyphs should be read, and recognised that hieroglyphs enclosed within oval rings (cartouches) were the names of royalty.

But in 1822, before Young was able to devise a system for reading the mysterious script, Frenchman Jean François Champollion recognised that signs could be alphabetic, syllabic or determinative, and established that the hieroglyphs inscribed on the Rosetta Stone were actually a translation from the Greek, and not the other way around. This allowed him to establish a complete list of signs with their Greek equivalents. His obsessive work not only solved the mystery of Pharaonic script but also contributed significantly to a modern understanding of ancient Egypt.

work in wooden panels along the same wall. Be sure to look up at the ceiling to see intricately carved decorations painted brilliant blue. Also notice the little revolving turntable, designed so that women could serve tea and coffee without being seen. The nearby bedroom has several smaller rooms attached, one that would have been a walk-in wardrobe and another a *hammam* (bathhouse) with separate toilet.

OTHER HOUSES

Right next door to the House of Amasyali, the **House of Abu Shaheen** (Mill House) incorporates an impressive reconstructed mill on the ground floor. In the courtyard, the roof of the stables is supported by granite columns with Graeco-Roman capitals. Nearby, the large and still-functioning 18th-century **Mosque of Sheikh Ali al-Mahalli** contains 99 columns recycled from Roman and Mamluk monuments.

The first examples of Ottoman architecture you're likely to come across, if you arrive at the service-taxi stand and microbus station, is a huddle of houses comprising of the **Abou**

Houm, Bassiouni, Al-Gamal, Kohiya, Moharrem and Ramadan Houses. Though not open to the public, this cluster of ornate façades makes it easy to imagine entire streets of Rosetta lined with similarly decadent abodes.

On Sharia Amasyali you will find more fine houses along the street and in the alleyways that lead off it. The **House of Al-Toqatli**, though closed to the public, has an interesting façade. On Sharia Amasyali there are a few more traditional houses that are all still closed to the public. Nearby, the four-storey **House of Al-Mizuni** was the home of the French General Mineau after he married Zubayda al-Bawab, the daughter of a rich local merchant.

One of the most extraordinary buildings in Rosetta has to be the **Hammam Azouz**, a 19th-century bathhouse. Just south of the city centre, this restored ode to Ottoman ablution has a fine marble interior with elaborately carved wooden beams and trimmings. Several bathing rooms encircle the main, fountain-centred bath room, and tall domed ceilings crown each chamber. Tiny round holes in the domes let in piercing shafts of light (and would have

let out steam), with some still covered in colourful stained glass that further bathes the place in a faint rainbow of surreal colours. Tickets for the bathhouse are available at the House of Amasyali (see p396).

The **Fort of Qaitbey** (adult/student £12/6) was built in 1479, just before the sultan's fort in Alexandria, to guard the mouth of the Nile. Boats depart from the Corniche near the museum garden and make the tour to the mouth of the Nile, 5km upriver, for £50 per person (1½ hours).

Sleeping & Eating

Rosetta sees few travellers and has limited tourist facilities, with only a handful of hotels and restaurants.

El-Nile Hotel (☎ 045 292 2382; Corniche; s/d with shared bathroom ££30/60) The pick of the accommodation bunch before the Rasheed International rolled into town, El-Nile is a long, slippery slide down the quality ladder. The rooms are musty and ragged – don't even ask about the shared bathrooms. At least the front-facing rooms have balconies with views over the river.

Rasheed International Hotel (☎ 045 293 4399; www.rossettahotel.jeeran.com; Museum Garden Sq; s/d ££90/123; 🍷) Proudly Rosetta's newest, finest and first nice-smelling hotel. This skinny, 11-storey place has plainly decorated but spotless new rooms, all with satellite TV, minibar and balconies with top views of the town – on a clear day you can see the Mediterranean from the higher floors. Its restaurant serves some of the better food in town, with Egyptian favourites and some Western dishes thrown in to boot. Expect to pay around ££40 for dinner.

Andrea Park Restaurant (☎ 010 260 6497; meals ££25-40) Locals swear by this Nile-side place, 1.2Km north of town. It's in a lovely spot by the river, with trim trees and breezy outdoor seating. There's no menu, but staff will happily whip up most of the Egyptian usuals, or whatever the catch of the day might be.

Alternatively, as with any small Egyptian town, you can usually hunt down a few *ta'amiyya* stands and roast-chicken places in the town's busy market streets.

Getting There & Away

Although buses and trains operate between Alexandria and Rosetta, the easiest way to make the trip is by service taxi or microbus (££3 to ££35, one hour) from the Al-

Mo'af al-Gedid long-distance bus station in Alexandria. Alternatively take a minibus from Alexandria's Misr Train Station to Abu Qir (££1.50). Ask to be dropped at the Rosetta minibus stand (££2.50, 45 minutes) near Abu Qir. Coming back, it's easiest to get a microbus (££3) from Rosetta straight to Al-Mo'af al-Gedid bus station in Alexandria. If you are with several people, you can share a private taxi from Alexandria to Rosetta for ££100 to ££150, including waiting time.

MEDITERRANEAN COAST

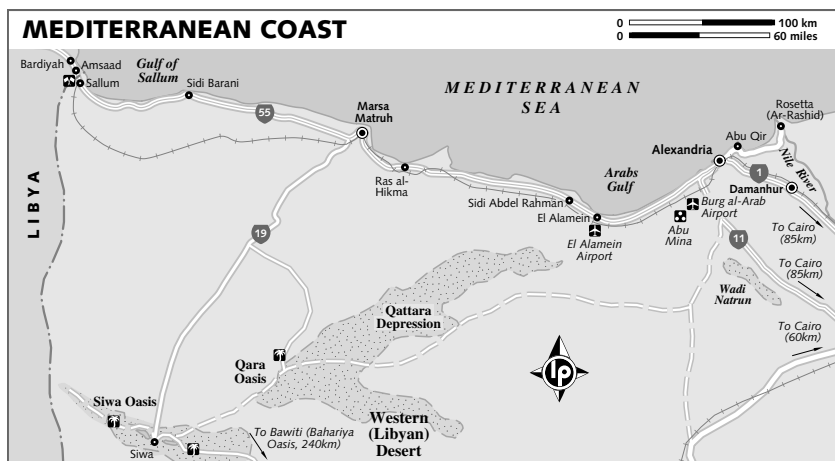
Almost the entire stretch of coastline between Alexandria and Sidi Abdel Rahman is jam-packed with resorts paying homage to the modern gods of concrete construction. This is where well-to-do Cairenes and the top brass of Egypt's military establishment now come to escape the oppressive city heat of the summer. It's so busy here that when driving past, the only glimpses you're likely to get of the ocean are through the skeletal structures of unfinished holiday villages. While some of these getaways border on the truly luxurious, there's little for the independent traveller. Halfway down the coast to Libya, El Alamein is home to several poignant memorials to the WWII battles that ensued here. Past here, and all the way to the Libyan border, the striking coast lies deserted until you reach Marsa Matruh, sitting on a brilliant, sandy bay. Matruh is either heaving with Egyptian holiday-makers in summer or completely deserted in the winter months.

EL ALAMEIN

☎ 046

This small coastal outpost (not a 'city' as the brochures would have you believe) is famed for the decisive victory that was doled out here by the Allies in the WWII North Africa campaign.

In June 1942 the Afrika Korps, headed by German General Erwin Rommel (nicknamed 'Desert Fox'), launched an all-out offensive from Tobruk, Libya. Determined to take control of Alexandria, and the strategically important Suez Canal, the Axis powers and their 500 tanks came within nearly 100km of their goal. It was not the first attempt in what had been two years of seesaw battles, but this time the Axis forces were confident of a breakthrough. However, the Allies, under the command



of General Bernard Montgomery ('Monty'), stopped their advance with a line of defence stretching southward from El Alamein to the Qattara Depression. On 23 October 1942 Montgomery's 8th Army swooped down from Alexandria with a thousand tanks, and within two weeks routed the combined German and Italian forces, driving Rommel and what was left of the Afrika Korps back to Tunisia.

More than 80,000 soldiers were killed or wounded at El Alamein and in the subsequent battles for control of North Africa. The thousands of graves in the three massive war cemeteries in the vicinity of the town are a bleak reminder of the losses.

El Alamein's War Museum and the Commonwealth War Cemetery are along a side road that leaves the main highway at the Greek war memorial and rejoins it again after passing right through the town.

Though it's possible to stay overnight nearby in Sidi Abdel Rahman, El Alamein is best visited as a day trip from Alexandria; there really isn't much here that would detain any but the most enthusiastic of military historians for more than a few hours.

Sights

COMMONWEALTH WAR CEMETERY

On the eastern side of town, this **cemetery** (admission free) is a haunting place where more than 7000 tombstones cover a slope overlooking the desert battlefield of El Alamein. Soldiers from the UK, Australia, New Zealand, France,

Greece, South Africa, East and West Africa, Malaysia and India who fought for the Allied cause lie here. Outside, a small separate memorial commemorates the Australian contingent and a little further east is another memorial for the Greeks.

GERMAN & ITALIAN WAR MEMORIALS

About 7km west of El Alamein, what looks like a hermetically sealed sandstone fortress appears on a bluff overlooking the sea. Inside this silent but unmistakable reminder of war lie the tombs of German servicemen and, in the centre, a memorial obelisk.

About 4km further on, the Italian memorial has a tall, slender tower as its focal point. Before reaching the German memorial, you'll notice on the left side of the road what appears to be a glorified milestone. On it is inscribed in Italian '*Mancò la fortuna, non il valore*' – 'We were short on luck, not on bravery'.

WAR MUSEUM

There is a good collection of memorabilia, uniforms and pictorial material of each country involved in the Battle of El Alamein and the North African campaigns at the **War Museum** (☎ 410 0031/21; adult/student ££10/5; 🕒 9am–4pm). Maps and explanations of the campaign in Arabic, English, German and Italian complement the exhibits, and there's a 30-minute Italian-made documentary that you can watch. A collection of tanks, artillery and hardware

from the fields of battle is displayed outside the museum.

Sleeping & Eating

Al-Amarna Hotel almost opposite the War Museum has a small cafeteria where you can get a greasy omelette, a drink and some biscuits but nothing more. It has a few spartan bedrooms, only used as an emergency by drivers to the nearby beach resorts.

The closest viable place to stay or eat is the El Alamein Hotel at Sidi Abdel Rahman (right), 23km west of El Alamein town. It may be possible to camp on the beaches nearby, but you'll have to hunt around for the police and attempt to get a *tasreeh* (camping permit).

Getting There & Away

The easiest option is to organise a car and English-speaking driver through **Mena Tours** (Map p374; ☎ 480 9676; menatoursalk@yahoo.com; 🕒 9am-5pm Sat-Thu), based next to the Cecil Hotel in Alexandria. This will cost approximately ££450 to ££500 per car. A private taxi will charge ££200 to ££300 to take you to the War Museum, ferry you around the cemeteries and bring you back to Alexandria.

Alternatively, catch any of the Marsa Matruh buses from the Al-Mo'af al-Gedid long-distance bus station in Alexandria (see p393). You'll be dropped on the main road about 200m down the hill from the War Museum.

Service taxis, mostly minibuses, sometimes leave from Al-Mo'af al-Gedid in Alexandria and cost about ££8 to ££10. You can pick up one of these from El Alamein back to Alexandria or to head further west to Sidi Abdel Rahman. Some travellers have found the return trip to Alexandria more of a challenge. You'll need to flag down the minibus by the side of the highway.

Charter flights have recently started operating from the UK and Germany to El Alamein airport in combination with a week's stay at the Mövenpick El Alamein Resort & Spa (for more details, see right).

SIDI ABDEL RAHMAN

☎ 046

The gorgeous beaches of Sidi Abdel Rahman are the *raison d'être* for this growing resort hamlet, and with charter flights starting between Europe and nearby El Alamein (23km east), development is likely to con-

tinue. Several resorts take prime position on the sparkling waters and white sands of the Mediterranean and are the major draw – though there is little else to see or do here.

Bedouins from the Awlad Ali tribe occasionally congregate in a small village about 3km in from the beach. Originally from the Libyan Cyrenaica, they came to the region several hundred years ago and settled, subduing the smaller local tribes of the Morabiteen. The Egyptian government has been attempting to settle these nomads, so today most Bedouins have forsaken their tents and herd their sheep and goats from the immobility of government-built houses, though you're still likely to see people ushering herds of livestock around.

Sleeping & Eating

El Alamein Hotel (☎ 492 1228; alamein_hotel@yahoo.com; s/d half-board ££450/800; 🏠) This small resort has rooms and villas that tend to be both completely booked and fully functioning all summer, but quite desolate for the rest of the year. People flock here for the magnificent views over the clear aqua-blue waters, not for the average food served at the restaurant. About 3km west, a turn-off leads to Hanna Beach (Shaah al-Hanna), where during summer you might find a few tents set up for passers-by.

Mövenpick El Alamein Resort & Spa (☎ 419 0061/71; www.moevenpick-hotels.com; 140km from Alexandria on the Matruh rd, Ghazala Bay, s/d half-board US\$140/180; 🏠) Another 12km further west, this large new resort caters for European package tourists who fly in on charters. The large comfortable rooms have views over the azure waters of the sea and the large swimming pool. Also on offer are a spa, fitness centre, indoor swimming pool and several restaurants – good thing, too as there's absolutely nowhere to go and nothing to do nearby. Check its website for promotional offers, particularly in summer.

Getting There & Away

The same buses that can drop you at El Alamein en route to or from Marsa Matruh can also drop you here. They generally stop for a break just after the Hanna Beach turn-off. There are service taxis operating between El Alamein and Sidi Abdel Rahman and to places further west, but nothing much happens after early afternoon.

MARSA MATRUH

☎ 046 / pop 159,710

Your experience of the brilliant white sand and turquoise-lined bays of Marsa Matruh will depend on what time of year you arrive. In the summer months of June to September, half of the lower Nile valley descends on this sleepy Mediterranean town for their holiday spell. At this time the streets buzz with people late into the night, throngs of street stalls sell hot food and souvenirs, and impromptu street musicians bang out rhythmic tunes. But the beaches are sardine-packed full of picnicking families, hotels raise their rates to astronomical heights and buses to and from town overflow. The rest of the year, Marsa Matruh returns to its usual near-comatose state. Many hotels shut their doors at this time, the city's beautiful bay of white, sandy beaches lies empty, and the only visitors are Bedouins and Libyans stocking up on goods. Whatever the time of year, few foreign tourists make the trip out here, except to break the journey to Siwa.

Orientation

The two key streets in Marsa Matruh are the Corniche (Al-Corniche), which winds its way around the waterfront, and Sharia Iskendariyya, which runs perpendicular to the Corniche, towards the hill behind the town. The pricier hotels are along the Corniche, while most others are near Sharia Iskendariyya, as well as most of the restaurants and shops.

BURIED FUNGAL TREASURE

Believe it or not truffles, those precious, pungent, underground fungi so beloved of Italian and French gourmands, are also found in the barren plains of Egypt's northern coastline. Terfeziaceae, or desert truffles, are endemic to the sort of arid and semiarid regions found throughout the Middle East and North Africa's Mediterranean coast. Apparently, these tasty delicacies have been known to Arabs for thousands of years (by their classical name *kamaa*). It's also believed that the Pharaohs of Egypt sampled them on occasion, and the caliphs of Cairo were known to have a nibble as well.

The flavour of the desert truffle, known as *terfas* to the Bedouin, is slightly less intense than its European counterpart, but tends to be more affordable since it is more abundant. Local belief has it that the fungus only grows wherever lightning strikes the desert. The lightning bit might be a bit of a stretch, but *terfas* do require a minimal amount of rain to germinate. Desert truffles are prepared locally in several ways: fried in butter, boiled in camel's milk or, best of all, roasted. Although Marsa Matruh is a major Egyptian truffle-gathering centre, much of the precious cargo is whisked away to lucrative international markets. But the *terfa* also has a long history in Egypt, so don't be surprised to find a small pile of this buried treasure at the local market.

Information

There are several exchange bureaus on Sharia al-Galaa.

Banque Misr (Map p402; Sharia al-Galaa; ☎ 9am-2.30pm & 6.30-8pm Sun-Thu) Has an ATM.

Main post office (Map p402; Sharia ash-Shaati; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sun-Fri)

Military Hospital (Map p402; ☎ 493 5286; Sharia ash-Shaati)

National Bank of Egypt (Map p402; off Sharia al-Matar; ☎ 9am-2pm & 6-9pm Sun-Thu)

Passport office (Map p402; ☎ 493 5351; off Sharia Iskendariyya; ☎ 8.30am-2pm & 6-9pm Jun-Sep, 8.30am-2pm & 5-8pm Oct-May)

Telephone centrale (Map p402; Sharia ash-Shaati; ☎ 24hr)

Tourist office (Map p402; ☎ 493 1841; cnr Sharia Omar Mukhtar & Al-Corniche; ☎ 8.30am-7pm Jun-Sep, 8.30am-5pm Oct-May)

Tourist police (Map p402; ☎ 493 5575; cnr Sharia Omar Mukhtar & Al-Corniche)

Sights & Activities

ROMMEL'S MUSEUM & BEACH

German commander of the Afrika Korps Erwin Rommel is said to have used the caves here as his headquarters during part of the El Alamein campaign. The rather scarce **Rommel's Museum** (Map p404; ☎ 494 6830; admission E£5; ☎ 8am-5pm) contains a few photos, a bust of the Desert Fox, some ageing German, Italian and British military maps, and what is purported to be Rommel's greatcoat. The museum is about 3km east of the town centre, out by the beach of the same name.



Rommel's Beach, a little west of the museum, is where the field marshal supposedly took time off from war to have his daily swim. It would have been a good choice and is now packed with holidaying Egyptians in summer; women will feel uncomfortable bathing here. To get here you can walk around the little bay (45 minutes), hire a bike or take a taxi (££4 to ££5) from Marsa Matruh.

OTHER BEACHES

The luminescence of the water along this stretch of the coast is only marred by the town's overflowing hotel scene. Further away, the water is just as nice and you can still find a few places where the developers have yet to start pouring cement. During the hot summer months women cannot bathe in swimsuits, unless they can handle being the object of intense harassment and ogling. The exception is the private beaches at Hotel Beau Site and San Giovanni Cleopatra, although even here most Egyptian women remain fully dressed and in the shade.

If you do manage to get into the azure waters, offshore lies the wreck of a German submarine, and sunken Roman galleys reputedly rest in deeper waters off to the east.

The **Lido**, the main beach in town, is no longer an attractive swimming spot.

The next choice is either **Cleopatra's Beach** or **Shaati al-Gharam** (Lovers' Beach), which are about 14km and 17km respectively west of town around the bay's thin tentacle of land. The rock formations here are worth a look and you can wade to Cleopatra's Bath, a natural pool where legend has imagined the great queen and Mark Antony enjoying a swim. In summer several boats leave from near Hotel Beau Site to go across the bay to Cleopatra's Beach and Shaati al-Gharam. Taxis will charge about ££70 to bring you here and to wait while you enjoy the beach.

Agiba means 'miracle' in Arabic and **Agiba Beach**, about 24km west of Marsa Matruh, is just that. It is a small but spectacular cove, accessible only via a path leading down from the cliff top. There is a café nearby (open in summer only) where you can get light refreshments. Again, it is absolutely packed in summer and near empty the rest of the year.

Sleeping

The accommodation situation in Marsa Matruh leaves a lot to be desired. With a few

exceptions, hotels generally specialise in mediocrity at unreasonable rates, but demand for rooms over summer is such that hoteliers really don't need to try very hard. We list a few of the better, more central options.

Prices fluctuate wildly from winter to summer. In the June to September summer months you're advised to book well ahead, though note that many hotels will make you pay for a double room even if you are travelling solo.

BUDGET

El-Ghazala Hotel (Map p402; ☎ 493 3519; Sharia Alam ar-Rum; dm ££15, s/d ££25/40) The cleaning lady here packed her bags and left long ago (the whiffy communal toilets still miss her) but this bare-bones hotel remains one of the cheapest and most popular places to bed down year-round. Entry to this backpackers' grotto is hidden between two shops.

Hotel Hamada (Map p402; ☎ 493 3300; Sharia Tahrir; s/d with shared bathroom ££25/50) Located right in the centre of town, the Hamada is a rudimentary budget option with reasonably clean rooms and friendly staff. Note that in summer the riotous party noise from Sharia Iskendiyya below can be deafening.

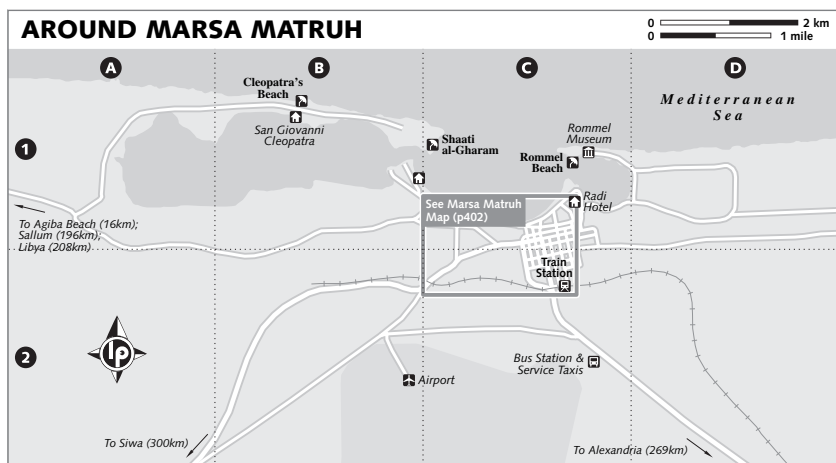
Rommel House Hotel (Map p402; ☎ 493 5466; fax 493 2485; Sharia al-Galaa; s/d half-board Jun-Sep ££85/130, Oct-May ££50/65; 🍷) Well away from the hub-bub of the Corniche and Sharia Iskendiyya, rooms at this dependable, long-standing and cavernous hotel come with private bathroom, TV and refrigerator. Respect goes out to it for the relatively mild summer price hike.

Radi Hotel (Map p404; ☎ 493 4827/8; Al-Corniche; s/d half-board Jun-Sep ££145/224, Oct-May s/d ££50/70; 🍷) This three-star hotel overlooking Rommel Beach has spacious rooms with private bathroom and satellite TV. It is blockbooked in the summer with Cairenes, when half-board is obligatory.

El-Lido (Map p402; ☎ 493 2248; Sharia Iskendiyya; r Jun-Sep ££200, s/d Oct-May ££50/70; 🍷) Even though the rooms in this centrally located tower block see less daylight than Dracula, it's still a fair deal by Marsa Matruh's low standards – especially considering you get air-con thrown in.

MIDRANGE

Reem Hotel (Map p402; ☎ 493 3605; Al-Corniche; d Jun-Sep ££250, s/d Oct-May ££120/180; 🍷) The Reem has lots of institutionally white halls and rooms



with balconies facing the ocean. While the abodes may suffer a serious charisma deficit, they do offer a spick-and-span place to sleep. View-deprived rooms are a little cheaper.

Riviera Palace Hotel (Map p402; ☎ 493 3045; fax 493 0004; Sharia Iskendariyya; s/d half-board Jun-Sep US\$50/70, Oct-May US\$40/60; 🍷) When it's not fully booked by holidaying Cairenes, the rooms here are big and tidy. Try as it might, the schizophrenic foyer design, oscillating from a chandelier-clad nautical theme to a stuffed-tiger motif, does little to add any real character to the place.

Negresco Hotel (Map p402; ☎ 493 4491/2; fax 493 3960; Al-Corniche; s/d half-board Jun-Sep £400/560, Oct-May £300/400; 🍷) The Negresco adds a much needed dollop of Mediterranean charm to Marsha Matruh's hotel scene, with white-washed walls and pretty blue balconies. The rooms are overpriced but immaculate and the facilities adequate.

TOP END

Hotel Beau Site (Map p402; ☎ 493 2066; www.beausiteho.tel.com; Al-Corniche; s/d half-board Jun-Sep from US\$125/155, s/d Oct-May US\$65/81; 🍷 📺) This is one of the most comfortable options in Matruh town, particularly if you choose the more expensive 'luxury' rooms on the beach, with satellite TV. The Beau Site boasts the only private beach in the town centre, a few bars, several good restaurants, as well as a few unadvertised 'budget' rooms (with shared bathroom). Beware that a plethora of taxes and hidden charges is usually tacked onto every bill – check it carefully.

San Giovanni Cleopatra (Map p404; ☎ 494 7600; www.sangiovanni.com; near Cleopatra Beach, 14km west of Marsa Matruh; s/d Jun-Sep US\$110/150, Oct-May US\$75/110) The most recent arrival is the town's only five-star beach resort, part of the San Giovanni chain. Designed to imitate a souped-up Italianate villa, its 67 spacious rooms overlook a private beach and swimming pool. The hotel offers a range of beach activities, a health club and video games for the kids. The hotel's boats make trips to nearby beaches.

Eating

The dining situation in Matruh is nothing to write home about. In winter you may have a hard time finding something to eat, although Abdu Kofta is open year-round.

RESTAURANTS

If you've been traversing through the Western Deserts for several weeks, you might just be tempted by a shamefully greasy taste of home: KFC, McDonalds and Baskin Robbins all have outlets along the Corniche during the July to September summer months.

Abu Rabie (Map p402; Sharia Iskendariyya; dishes E£3-15) A very popular takeaway with *fuul*, *ta'amiyya* and salads, as well as fried *gambari* (prawn) and *kalamaari* (squid).

Panyotis Greek Restaurant (Map p402; Sharia Iskendariyya; dishes E£5-30) Matruh's oldest restaurant rests a little on its laurels, but it's still okay. Fish and seafood are accompanied by tahini and salads and, a rarity in town, a cold beer.

Abdu Kofta (Map p402; ☎ 012 314 4989; Sharia Gamal Abd an-Nasser, off Sharia at-Tahrir; dishes E£5-60; 🍴) Locals will swear black and blue that this is the best restaurant in town. In the clean and cool 1st-floor room, it serves *kofta* (mincemeat and spices grilled on a skewer) or grilled meat by the weight served with good meze and salads.

Camona Restaurant (Map p402; Sharia Galaa; meals E£8-20) This simple restaurant does a roaring daily trade in grilled meats (ie just chicken and kebabs). Follow your nose when you get to the Iskendariyya corner and you can't miss it.

Abou Aly Pizza (Map p402; Sharia Iskendariyya; pizzas E£12-18) For as-close-as-you'll-get-to-the-real-thing Western-style pizza, you can't go past Abou Aly. It has lots of seating upstairs, and as a bonus you can people-watch the action on Sharia Iskendariyya below while tucking in.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Twice-weekly flights between Cairo and Marsa Matruh are available with **EgyptAir** (Map p402; ☎ 493 6573; Sharia al-Matar) from June to September, leaving Cairo at 3.15pm and returning at 5pm. Tickets are about E£700 one-way.

BUS

Matruh's bus station (Map p402) is 2km out of town on the main coastal highway. Expect to pay about E£7 for a taxi to the town centre.

Superjet (☎ 490 4787) has several services a day from June to September. Buses to Alexandria (E£30, four hours) leave at 2.30pm and to Cairo (E£50, five hours) at 1pm, 2pm, 3.30pm and 4pm.

West Delta Bus Co (☎ 490 5079) has hourly services to Alexandria from 7am to 2am (E£17 to E£30, four hours). Buses to Cairo (E£35 to E£50, five hours) leave at 7.30am, noon, 3.30pm, 8pm and 2am in winter; from June to September they leave hourly from 7.30am to midnight. Buses to Sallum (E£15, four hours) run six times a day from 6am to midnight.

Buses to Siwa (E£12, four hours) leave at 7am, 1.30pm, 4pm and 7.30pm.

SERVICE TAXI

The service-taxi lot is beside the bus station. Service taxis to Siwa, if there are enough passengers, cost E£12. Other fares include El Alamein (E£10), Alexandria (E£15), Cairo (E£25 to E£30), Sallum (E£12) and Sidi Barani (E£12).

LIBYA BORDER CROSSING

The border crossing point of Amsaad, just north of Halfaya Pass, is open 24 hours (sometimes even in a row). It's 12km west of Sallum or a E£5 service taxi-ride away. For information about visas for Libya, see p525.

TRAIN

Between June and September there is a daily luxury sleeper train between Cairo and Marsa Matruh. Trains leave Matruh at 10pm and arrive in Cairo at 6am. Tickets are US\$45 per person in a double cabin, US\$60 in a single. Reservations can either be made in Cairo (☎ 02-738 3682/4) or by purchasing your ticket on the train.

Otherwise, avoid the rails. Even the stationmaster at Marsa Matruh calls the trains 'horrible'.

Getting Around

Private taxis or pick-ups can be hired for the day, but you must negotiate and bargain aggressively, especially in summer. Expect to pay E£80 to E£150, depending on the distance.

Bikes can be rented from makeshift rental places along Sharia Iskendariyya during the high season for around E£10 to E£20 per day. A taxi to the airport will cost around E£7 to E£10.

SIDI BARANI

☎ 046

About 135km west of Marsa Matruh on the way to Libya is this small but busy Bedouin town. It serves a bit of a food and petrol to traffic coming from Libya, but that's about it. There's a small hotel and a few unsanitary places to eat.

SALLUM

☎ 46

Look up in the dictionary 'middle of nowhere' and you might just find the town of Sallum, a mere 12km from the Libyan border. Nestled at the foot of Gebel as-Sallum and lying on the gulf of the same name, Sallum was once the ancient port of Baranis. While a few Roman wells testify to its history, it is now mostly a Bedouin trading post that sees few international visitors.

The sea here, as along the rest of this stretch of coast, is crystal clear and aquamarine in

colour, but don't think about frolicking in the water – dumped rubbish lines the sand, government property surrounds the town and permits are needed to be on the beach after 5pm.

On the eastern entrance to the town there is a modest WWII Commonwealth War Cemetery, commemorating the destruction of hundreds of British tanks by the Germans at nearby 'Hell Fire' pass.

There are no banks open and no exchange office in Sallum, although some hotels may agree to exchange money.

Sleeping & Eating

If you can, you will want to avoid staying in Sallum, but if you have no choice the **Hotel al-Ahram** (☎ 480 0148; s/d ££14/21) is the best of an unattractive bunch. The rooms are spartan and when there is water, it's cold.

There are a couple of rough *lokandas* (basic, cheap places to doss) with their names in Arabic only, of which the Sirt Hotel is the better one.

At the border, 12km further on, is Hotel at-Ta'un (signed in Arabic only). There are two modest *fuul* stands around, but check on the price first as it may be higher for the lone foreigner passing by.

Getting There & Away

There are buses and the odd service taxi leaving from Alexandria (p393) and Marsa Matruh (p405). See those sections for details.

From Sallum, buses for Marsa Matruh (££15, four hours) depart hourly between 7am and 2am; some of these continue on to Alexandria (££28, eight hours). A service taxi to Marsa Matruh will cost about ££12.