

# Red Sea Coast



Arguably the world's most famous stretch of coast, it was here that Moses allegedly parted a great sea and set free the Hebrew slaves. Of course, Hollywood movie-magic and biblical allegory aside, most visitors to this coastline seem perfectly content in letting the Red Sea lie still. Famed for its brilliant turquoise waters and splendid coral reefs, the Red Sea Coast attracts tens of thousands of tourists annually. In fact, it's Egypt's most rapidly developing area, with more hotels and resorts than anywhere else in the country.

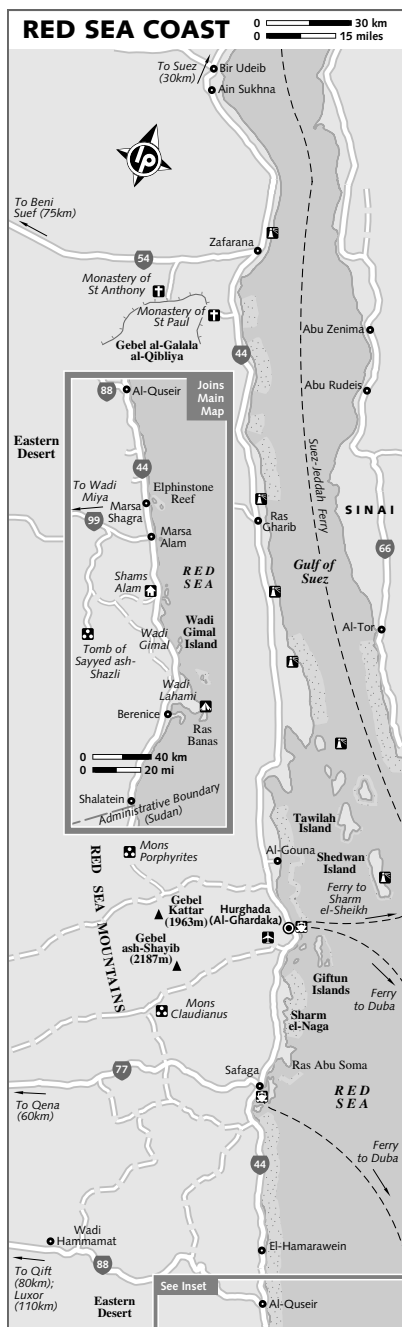
Unfortunately, the overall picture is anything but pretty, especially since large tracts of the 800km coastline are nothing short of an environmental disaster. Fuelled by decades of European-driven package tourism, and compounded by the lack of any kind of sustainable development plan, illegal landfill operations and irresponsible mooring have destroyed offshore reefs, and the construction of solid concrete jetties have simply eroded away parts of the coastline. Furthermore, declining tourism amid increasing fears of a wider Middle East war has spooked investors, and today much of the coastline remains a construction site of half-finished hotels.

For independent travellers weary of package tourism, the Red Sea Coast can be a frustrating place to visit, though it shouldn't be overlooked all together. Far removed from the coastal scene is the Eastern Desert, which harbours Christianity's two oldest monasteries, plus traces of Pharaonic, Roman and other settlements. The inland is also home to wadis, ancient rock art and nomad cultures, and offers countless opportunities for travellers seeking a healthy dose of desert adventure. And of course, if you do happen to find yourself in any of the Red Sea's coastal resort towns, the diving here truly is world-class.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Discover Christian monasticism's centuries-old roots at the **monasteries of St Anthony and St Paul** (p418)
- Trek through mountains and wadis, visit old mines and ruins and gaze at ancient rock art in the **Eastern Desert** (p435)
- Interact responsibly and sustainably with the **Ababda and Besharin** (p437), two nomadic peoples who maintain their traditions in a changing world
- Plunge into the underwater world of the **Red Sea** (p424)
- Wander along the picturesque waterfront of the sleepy coastal town of **Al-Quseir** (p432)





## RED SEA MONASTERIES

The Coptic monasteries of St Anthony and St Paul are Egypt's and Christianity's oldest monasteries, and are among the holiest sites in the Coptic faith. In fact, the establishment of the religious community of St Anthony's, hidden in the barren cliffs of the Eastern Desert, marks the beginning of the Christian monastic tradition.

If you're at all interested in Egypt's lengthy Christian history, both monasteries make for fascinating and inspiring visits, and the surrounding desert scenery is simply breathtaking. And, depending on where you're coming from, the Red Sea monasteries are a refreshing change of scene from the hassles and touts of Cairo and the Nile Valley, or the package tourism and rampant commercialism of the coastline.

## Orientation & Information

St Anthony's and St Paul's monasteries are only about 25km apart, but thanks to the cliffs and plateau of Gebel al-Galala al-Qibliya (which lies between 900m and 1300m above sea level), the distance between them by road is around 85km.

Both monasteries are open daily throughout the year (St Anthony's from 7am to 5pm, St Paul's from 8am to 3pm), except during Advent and Lent, when they can only be visited on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. During Holy Week they are closed completely to visitors. For inquiries or to confirm visiting times, contact the monasteries' Cairo headquarters: **St Paul's** (☎ 02-590 0218; 26 Al-Keneesa al-Morcosia) or **St Anthony's** (☎ 02-590 6025; 26 Al-Keneesa al-Morcosia), located off Clot Bey, south of Midan Ramses in Cairo.

If you don't have your own vehicle, the easiest way to visit the monasteries is to join an organised tour from Cairo or Hurghada (any hotel or travel agency can organise these). It's also possible to join a pilgrimage group from Cairo – the best way to arrange this is by inquiring at local Coptic churches.

## Sights

### MONASTERY OF ST ANTHONY

This historic monastery traces its origins to the 4th century AD when monks began to settle at the foot of Gebel al-Galala al-Qibliya, where their spiritual leader, Anthony (see the boxed text, opposite), lived. Over the next few centuries, the community moved from

## THE FATHER OF MONASTICISM

Although St Paul is honoured as the earliest Christian hermit, it is St Anthony who is considered to be the Father of Monasticism. Anthony was born around AD 251, the son of a provincial landowner from a small Upper Egyptian town near Beni Suef. Orphaned with his sister at the age of 18, he was already more interested in the spiritual than the temporal, and soon gave away his share of the inheritance to the poor. After studying with a local holy man, Anthony went into the Eastern Desert, living in a cave and seeking solitude and spiritual salvation. However, word of his holiness soon spread, and flocks of disciples arrived, seeking to imitate his ascetic existence.

After a brief spell in Alexandria ministering to Christians imprisoned under Emperor Maximinus Daia in the early 4th century, Anthony returned to the desert. Once again, he was pursued by eager followers, though he managed to flee even further into the desert in search of solitude. However, after establishing himself in a cave on a remote mountain, his disciples formed a loose community at its base, and thus was born the first Christian monastery.

The number of Anthony's followers grew rapidly, and within decades of his death, nearly every town in Egypt was surrounded by hermitages. Soon after, the whole Byzantine Empire was alive with monastic fervour, which by the next century, had spread throughout Italy and France.

It is ironic that for all his influence, Anthony spent his life seeking to escape others. When he died at the advanced age of 105, his sole wish for solitude was finally respected, and the location of his grave became a closely guarded secret.

being a loosely organised grouping of hermits to a somewhat more communal existence in which the monks continued to live anchoritic lives, but in cells grouped together inside a walled compound.

In the 8th and 9th centuries, the monastery suffered Bedouin raids, followed in the 11th century by attacks from irate Muslims, and in the 15th century, a revolt by blood-thirsty servants that resulted in the massacre of the monks. The small mud-brick **citadel** into which they would retreat during attacks can still be seen, although visitors are not usually admitted. It's also possible to see the large basket and wooden winch that were the only means of getting into the monastery in times of attack.

Today the monastery is a large complex surrounded by high walls (it's possible to walk along the top of some sections), with several churches and chapels, a bakery, a lush garden and a spring. The source of the latter, deep beneath the desert mountains, produces 100 cu metres of water daily, allowing the monks to cultivate olive and date trees as well as a few crops.

The oldest part of the monastery is the **Church of St Anthony**, built over the saint's tomb and containing one of Egypt's most significant collections of Coptic wall paintings. Painted in *secco* (whereby paint is applied to dry plaster), most date back to the early 13th century, with a few possibly much

older. Stripped of the dirt and grime of centuries, the paintings are clear and bright, and demonstrate how medieval Coptic art was connected to the arts of the wider Byzantine and Islamic eastern Mediterranean (for more information on Coptic art, see the boxed text, p421). The monks who live here, following centuries-old traditions and the examples set by St Anthony, St Paul and their followers 16 centuries ago, have dedicated their lives to seeking God in the stillness and isolation of the desert, in a life centred completely around prayer.

Perched about 300m – or 1158 wooden steps – above the monastery on a nearby cliff is the **Cave of St Anthony**, where Anthony spent the final 40 years of his life. The climb up is hot and steep, and takes about half an hour if you're reasonably fit. At the top is a small clearing (now littered with the graffiti of countless pilgrims) with wide vistas over the hills and valley below. In the cave itself, which is for the svelte and nonclaustrophobic only (you need to squeeze through a narrow tunnel to get inside), there is a small chapel with an altar as well as a tiny recessed area where Anthony lived – bring a torch (flashlight) along to illuminate the interior.

There is usually an English-speaking monk on hand to give tours of the monastery (free, but a donation is expected). The monastery bookstore has a good selection of materials on Coptic Christianity.

## MONASTERY OF ST PAUL

St Paul's monastery dates to the 4th century, when it began as a grouping of hermitages in the cliffs of Gebel al-Galala al-Qibliya around the site where St Paul had his hermitage. Paul, who was born into a wealthy family in Alexandria in the mid-3rd century, originally fled to the Eastern Desert to escape Roman persecution. He lived alone in a cave here for over 90 years, finding bodily sustenance in a nearby spring and palm tree. According to tradition, in AD 343 the then 90-year-old St Anthony had a vision of Paul. After making a difficult trek through the mountains to visit him, Paul died, and was buried by Anthony's hands.

The heart of the monastery complex is the **Church of St Paul**, which was built in and around the cave where Paul lived. It's cluttered with altars, candles, ostrich eggs (the symbol of the Resurrection) and murals representing saints and biblical stories. The **fortress** above the church was where the monks retreated during Bedouin raids.

St Paul's monastery is quieter and much more low key than St Anthony's, and is often bypassed in favour of its larger neighbour. However, a visit is well worthwhile, and gives a glimpse into the life of silence, prayer and asceticism that has flowered here in the Eastern Desert for almost two millennia. Visitors are welcome, and there is usually an English-speaking monk available to give a guided tour (free, but donation appreciated).

## Activities

### HIKING

It is possible to hike between the two monasteries along a trail across the top of the plateau. However, hiking this rugged area, commonly known as 'Devil's Country', is only for the fit and experienced, and should under no circumstances be attempted without a local guide. In 2001, a lone tourist attempting the walk died of thirst after losing his way – this is clearly not a trip to undertake lightly. Those who have made the hike recommend starting from St Paul's, and the hike (about 30km) is possible in one long day, but better broken up into two.

## Sleeping & Eating

There is no accommodation for the general public at either monastery, although the guards at St Paul's will usually allow you

to pitch a tent outside the main monastery gate. Note that the monastery guesthouses are reserved for pilgrimage groups.

**Sahara Inn Motel** (s/d E£60/80, with air-con E£100/120; ☎) Consider spending the night in the nearby junction town of Zafarana where you'll find this motel, which offers up some bare-bones concrete cubicles and a basic roadside restaurant. It's not the Hilton, but if a day trip to the monasteries from Cairo or Hurghada just isn't enough time for you, this is probably your best option.

**Zafarana Resort** (☎ 418 6703; reservation@pharao-hotels.com; s/d half board E£220/320; ☎ 📺) Another place to call home for the night is located on a pleasant stretch of sand just off the coastal road, about 13km south of the main Zafarana junction. Perfectly adequate (though somewhat sterile) rooms are housed in long blocks (some with views of the water), and there's a restaurant with buffets and à la carte meals.

Both monasteries have canteens that sell snacks, drinks and simple meals.

## Getting There & Away

Zafarana is located 62km south of Ain Sukhna and 150km east of Beni Suef on the Nile. Buses running between Cairo or Suez and Hurghada will drop you at Zafarana, but direct access to the monasteries is limited to private vehicles and tour buses from Cairo or Hurghada. There's also one bus daily to and from Beni Suef, departing Zafarana from the main junction about 11.30am and Beni Suef at about 8am (E£20, three to four hours).

To get to St Anthony's, start from the main Zafarana junction, and follow the road west to Beni Suef for 37km to the monastery turn-off. From here, it's 17km further south along an unsurfaced but good road through the desert to St Anthony's. The bus between Zafarana and Beni Suef will drop you at the turn-off, from where the only option is walking or hitching (and you'll need to wait until the next day for a bus from the turn-off back to Zafarana or on to Beni Suef). If you do decide to hike in from the main road (which isn't the best idea), don't go alone, and be sure you're properly equipped, especially with water, as it's a long, hot, dry and isolated stretch.

The turn-off for St Paul's is about 27km south of the Zafarana lighthouse along the road to Hurghada (watch for a small sign-post). Once at the turn-off, it's then 10km further along a good tarmac road to the main

## COPTIC ART 101

Before you step foot into the Coptic monasteries of the Eastern Desert, here is a quick introduction to the history and tradition of Egyptian Coptic art.

### Overview

Coptic art refers to the distinct Christian art of Egypt. Although it originated from the ancient Egyptian and Greek heritages, Coptic art has also been influenced by the Persians, Byzantines and Syrians. In fact, due to its myriad influences, the exact nature of Coptic art can be difficult to define, though it is fortunately easy to identify. Since early Christian artisans were extremely utilitarian in their aims, Coptic art typically manifests itself in daily items including textiles and religious illustrations. Furthermore, Coptic art has a strong tradition of painting, particularly portraits and wall paintings.

### Textiles

The Coptic Church inherited a strong tradition of textile-making from the ancient Egyptians, particularly loom and tapestry weaving. For the most part, Coptic textiles are made from linen, though there is some evidence of sophisticated silk-weaving. In regards to design, Coptic textiles borrow heavily from Greek-Egyptian themes, and include traditional pattern motifs such as cupids, dancing maidens and animals. However, these are typically incorporated with unique Christian motifs such as fish, grapes and biblical scenes, especially the Immaculate Conception.

### Religious Illustrations

Religious illustration originated in ancient Egypt when pharaohs started adorning papyrus texts with liturgies and prayers. Coptic Christians retained this tradition, and early papyrus texts maintained the original Egyptian design of protective illustrations surrounded by elaborate borders and text. Like the Egyptians, Coptic artisans used bright colours for vignettes, and striking black ink for all texts. Later on, however, Coptic illustrations began to take on greater complexity as they started to incorporate religious imagery, landscapes and intricate geometric designs.

### Portraits

In comparison to other early Christian movements, the Coptic Church is unique in regard to their abundance of martyrs, saints and ascetics. Since the actions and deeds of these individuals helped to form the foundation of the church, their images were immortalised in portraits, and hung in every chapel and church throughout the land. In these paintings, the human figure is usually depicted in the front position, with placid, almond-shaped eyes and idealised expressions. Coptic portraits of Jesus Christ are unique in that they usually depict him enthroned by saints and angels as opposed to suffering on the cross.

### Wall Paintings

Early Coptic wall paintings were unsophisticated in comparison to later endeavours, though this is primarily due to the fact that ancient Egyptian temples were being converted into churches. In order to complete the transformation, Pharaonic reliefs were covered with layers of plaster, and Christian themes were painted on top. However, as Coptic art developed and prospered, wall painting became increasingly complex, particularly following the mastery of dye-mixing and gold stencilling. Some of the finest Coptic wall paintings depict spiritual scenes that are awash with vibrant colours and accented with gold.

### Coptic Art Today

Long overshadowed by both ancient Egyptian and Islamic themes, Coptic art is not given much attention in Egypt despite its lengthy history and established tradition. Fortunately, this cultural heritage has been preserved in museums, churches and monasteries throughout Egypt and the world, and the artistic traditions continue to flourish among communities of modern-day Copts.

gate of the monastery, and about 3km further to the monastery itself. Buses running between Suez and Hurghada will drop you along the main road at the turn-off, from where the only options are walking or hitching.

## HURGHADA (AL-GHARDAKA)

☎ 065

Once an isolated and modest fishing village, Hurghada has metamorphosed into a sprawling collection of more than 100 hotels, and is today Egypt's most popular resort destination. Despite its popularity, however, Hurghada is a frightful mix of endless construction and environmental degradation, served with a heaping dose of Russian package tourism.

Modern Hurghada is a dense band of concrete in the form of gated resorts, which sprawls along the coastline for more than 20km. Scattered amid these ageing pleasure palaces are literally thousands of construction sites, all in varying degrees of abandonment and neglect. Not surprisingly, the reefs close to shore have been degraded by illegal landfill operations and irresponsible reef use, and even the government concedes that it made planning mistakes here.

And then there are the Russians – while wealthy Western Europeans prefer the air-brushed shine of Sharm el-Sheikh (p462), Moscow's emerging middle class is flocking to Hurghada in droves. Attracted by the hot sun and warm sea (which are indeed rarities in Mother Russia), Russians are cashing in on cheap flights and discount package deals. Unfortunately, the Egyptian-Russian mix is anything but natural, especially since the Russian propensity for binge drinking and promiscuous dress is, needless to say, less than welcome in the Muslim world.

To be fair, Hurghada was put on the map because of its superb diving, and there are some incredible offshore sites here. If you want to combine a diving holiday with a visit to Luxor and other Nile Valley sites, Hurghada is a convenient destination if you don't mind the packaged resort feel. However, independent travellers would be wise to press on to Dahab in Sinai (p472) where the diving is better, and package tourism is still the exception rather than the norm. With that said, infrequent ferry connections to Sharm el-Sheikh mean that you will most likely have to spend at least

one night in Hurghada whether you like it or not.

## Orientation

Hurghada is split into three main areas. To the north is Ad-Dahar, where most budget accommodation is located. This is also the most 'Egyptian' part of the city, with lively backstreet neighbourhoods and a bustling souq. The main inland artery through Ad-Dahar is Sharia an-Nasr.

Separated from Ad-Dahar by a sandy mountain called Gebel al-Afish is the fast-growing and congested Sigala area, where resort hotels jostle for sea frontage, while smaller two- and three-star establishments and dozens of restaurants fill the spaces inland. This is also where you'll find the port for ferries to Sharm el-Sheikh. Sigala's main thoroughfare is Sharia Sheraton.

South of Sigala, lining the coastal road and increasingly some inland arteries as well, is the resort strip. Here you'll find an increasingly lengthening row of mostly upmarket pleasure domes, Western shopping malls and half-finished shells of hotels.

## Information

### EMERGENCY

**Air ambulance** (☎ 010 154 1978)

**Ambulance** (☎ 354 6490, 123)

**Police** (Map p428; ☎ 354 6303/6; Sharia Shedwan, Sigala)

**Tourist police** Ad-Dahar (Map p426; ☎ 344 4774; Sharia Al-Tahrir); Resort Strip (Map p423; ☎ 344 4773/4; next to the tourist office)

### INTERNET ACCESS

There are internet cafés all over the city and in many hotels, most charging between E£5 and E£10 per hour.

**Café Online** (Map p423; Resort Strip; per hr E£16;

☎ 10.15am-11.15pm; ☎) Has a juice bar.

**El Baroudy Internet** (Map p426; Sharia Sheikh Sabak, Ad-Dahar; per hr E£5; ☎ 24hr; ☎)

**Speed.Net** (Map p428; Sharia Al-Hadaba, Sigala; per hr E£10; ☎ 10am-midnight; ☎)

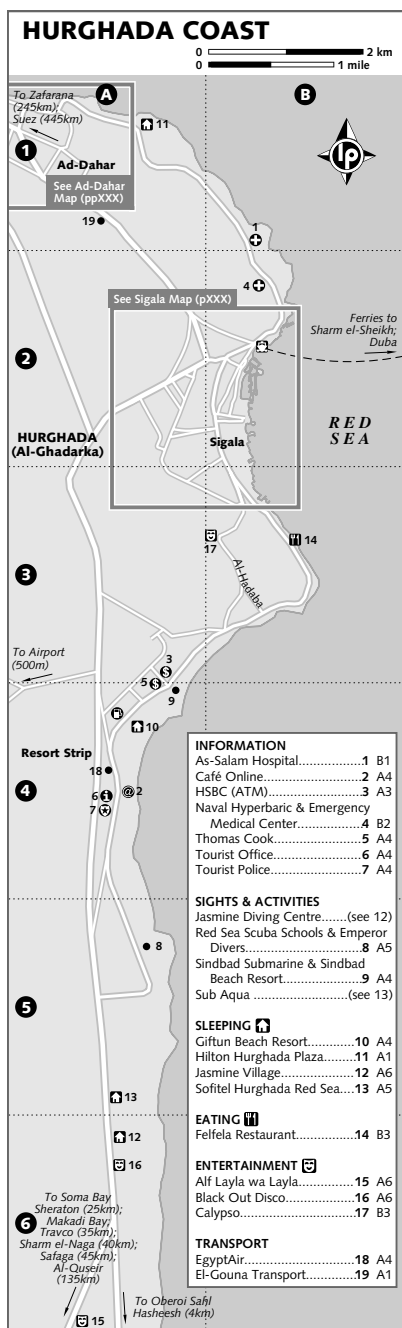
### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Al-Gouna Hospital** (☎ 358 0011; Al-Gouna)

**Al-Saffa Hospital** (Map p426; ☎ 3546 965; Sharia an-Nasr, Ad-Dahar)

**As-Salam Hospital** (Map p423; ☎ 354 8785/6/7; Corniche) Just north of Iberotel Arabella.

**Decompression Chambers** Al-Gouna (☎ 358 0011, 012 218 7550; Al-Gouna); Naval Hyperbaric & Emergency



Medical Center (Map p423; ☎ 344 9150, 354 8450; Corniche, near Iberotel Arabella)

**Public Hospital** (Map p426; ☎ 354 6740; Sharia Mustashfa, Ad-Dahar)

### MONEY

ATMs are all over the city, including at the following locations:

**HSBC** (Map p423; opposite Sindbad Beach Resort, Resort Strip)

**National Bank of Egypt** (Map p426; Sharia an-Nasr, Ad-Dahar; ☎ 8.30am-2pm & 6-9pm Sat-Thu)

**Triton Empire Beach** (Map p426; Sharia Sayed al-Qorayem, Ad-Dahar)

Other money outlets:

**Thomas Cook** Ad-Dahar (Map p426; ☎ 354 1870/1; Sharia an-Nasr; ☎ 9am-2pm & 6-10pm); Sigala (Map p428; ☎ 344 3338; Sharia Sheraton; ☎ 9am-3pm & 4-10pm); Resort Strip (Map p423; ☎ 344 6830; ☎ 9am-5pm)

**Western Union** (Map p428; ☎ 344 2771, 19190; Sharia Sheraton, Sigala; ☎ 8.30am-10pm Sat-Thu, 3-10pm Fri)

### POST

**Main post office** (Map p426; Sharia an-Nasr, Ad-Dahar; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sat-Thu)

### TELEPHONE

**Telephone Centrale** Ad-Dahar (Map p426; Sharia an-Nasr; ☎ 24hr); Port area (Map p428; Midan Shedwan; ☎ 24hr); Sigala (Map p428; Sharia Sheraton; ☎ 24hr)

### TOURIST INFORMATION

**Tourist office** (Map p423; ☎ 344 4420; Resort Strip; ☎ 9am-8pm Sat-Thu, 2-10pm Fri)

### TRAVEL AGENCIES

**Abanoub Travel** (Map p428; ☎ 344 2843; abanoub@menanet.net; 2nd fl, Cotton House Bldg, Sigala)

**Thomas Cook** (☎ 344 3338; www.thomascookegypt.com); Ad-Dahar (Map p426; Sharia an-Nasr; ☎ 9am-2pm & 6-10pm); Sigala (Map p428; Sharia Sheraton; ☎ 9am-3pm & 4-10pm); Resort Strip (Map p423; ☎ 9am-5pm)

### VISA EXTENSIONS

**Passport & Immigration Office** (Map p426; Sharia an-Nasr, Ad-Dahar; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu) For visa extensions and re-entry visas.

### Dangers & Annoyances

Although Hurghada is a resort town, many of the workers here come from the conservative towns that don't receive tourists, so their attitude towards women travellers is less than progressive (there have been rapes

and assaults in the past). To avoid hassle, women should dress modestly when walking around town, especially in the souq area of Ad-Dahar.

## Sights

### BEACHES

Although many of Hurghada's beaches are bare and stark, developers have snapped up almost every available spot. Apart from the not-so-appealing **public beach** (Map p428; Sigala; ☎ 8am-sunset), the main option for enjoying sand and sea is to go to one of the resorts, most of which charge nonguests between ££20 and ££60 for beach access. One of the best is the **Jasmine Village** (Map p423; ☎ 344 7442; Resort Strip), which has a small reef that allows you to combine snorkelling with sunbathing.

Other options include **Papas Beach Club** (Map p428; www.papasbar.com; Sigala; admission ££20; ☎ 9am-4am), where you can spend the day lazing under a palm shade listening to laid-back sounds; and the highly popular **Liquid Lounge** (Map p428; www.papasbar.com; Sharia Sheraton, Sigala; minimum food/beverage charge ££25; ☎ 9am-3am), a very chilled out beach bar/restaurant, with hammocks and floor pillows.

### AQUARIUM

If you don't want to put your head under the water, you can still get an idea of some of the life in the Red Sea's waters at the **aquarium** (Map p426; ☎ 354 8557; Corniche, Ad-Dahar; admission ££5; ☎ 9am-10pm). It's just north of the public hospital in Ad-Dahar and has a reasonable, if somewhat neglected selection of fish and other marine creatures.

## Activities

### SNORKELLING & DIVING

Although there is some easily accessible coral at the southern end of the resort strip, the best reefs are offshore, and the only way to see them is to take a boat and/or join a snorkelling or diving excursion. For all excursions, shop around a bit. Relying on your hotel may not be the best way to do things as travellers often complain about not getting everything they thought they would. For any boat excursion, take your passport with you as you'll need to show it at the port.

For an overview of diving in the Red Sea, including recommended operators and dive sites, see p439.

## SUBMARINE RIDES

A ride in the yellow **Sindbad Submarine** (Map p423; ☎ 344 4688; www.sindbad-group.com; Sindbad Beach Resort; adult/child US\$25/50), which takes up to 46 people to a depth of 22m, is one way to plumb the depths of the Red Sea while staying dry. Bookings can be made at any hotel or travel agency.

## Tours

Tours to almost anywhere in Egypt can be organised from Hurghada, including whirlwind one-day jaunts to Cairo (from ££250), slightly more leisurely two-day tours (from ££500) and one-day excursions to Luxor (££250). The most popular option from Hurghada is a desert jeep safari (from ££150), which usually includes visits to either Mons Porphyrites (p436) or Mons Claudianus (p436). Other possibilities include a full-day excursion to the monasteries of St Paul and St Anthony (p418), camel treks and sunset desert excursions.

To arrange any of the tours mentioned above, inquire at either your hotel or a travel agency in town – there are dozens, so you shouldn't have a problem finding one. Note that a minimum number of people are needed for most trips, so it's best to inquire several days in advance.

## Sleeping

Hurghada has the greatest selection of accommodation outside Cairo, though virtually everything in town is midrange to top-end resorts. Travel agencies in Europe and the UK can offer often-significant reductions if you book in advance, especially since prices fluctuate according to the season and state of the tourism industry. If you haven't booked a package deal in advance, however, you can still show up and request a room, though accommodation can get expensive. Fortunately, supply outstrips demand, so there is always room for negotiation – be patient and shop around.

Accommodation in Hurghada is split into three principle areas: Ad-Dahar, Sigala and the resort strip. Most budget accommodation is located within Ad-Dahar not far from the sea, though the water is rarely within sight. Sigala is a convenient base if you want to be near the nightlife, though it is extremely congested and noisy. The resort strip, which extends south of Hurghada along the coast, is home to the majority of the city's four- and



five-star resorts. If you stay down here, you will be able to enjoy a bit of privacy (a prized rarity in Egypt), though you will be dependent on your hotel for meals.

#### AD-DAHAR

**Shakespears Hotel** (Map p426; Sharia Sayyed al-Qorayem; r from E£50) We're not exactly sure what the owners of this hotel were thinking when they chose the name (no – Shakespears is not a typo), though we do know that it is one of only a few palatable shoestring options in Hurghada. The rooms are dingy, cramped and definitely not worthy of the playwright extraordinaire, though it will do if you just need a place to crash for the night. On a brighter note, there is a decent outdoor restaurant that is a good spot for a falafel sandwich or an apple-flavoured *sheesha* (water pipe).

**El-Arosa Hotel** (Map p426; ☎ 354 8434; elarosa hotel@yahoo.com; off Corniche; s/d from E£100/150; 🏠 📺 🚿) El-Arosa overlooks the sea in the distance from the inland side of the Corniche, though few of the rooms actually have ocean views. However, it is one of the best deals in town, especially considering that the rooms are equipped with modern amenities, and there's a small pool for cooling off (albeit it's located in the dining

room). A better option for cooling off is the nearby Geisum Village – guests at the El-Arosa have free access to the pools and beach.

**Cindrella Hotel** (Map p426; ☎ 355 6571; cindrella-sea view@yahoo.com; off Corniche; s/d from E£120/160; 🏠 📺 🚿) The Cindrella (again, it's not a typo) overlooks the sea in the distance from the inland side of the Corniche, though (again) few of the rooms actually have ocean views. But, this newish hotel does have spic-and-span rooms that are awash with bright pastel colours, and the spacious balconies are a nice touch. Like El-Arosa, guests at the Cindrella have free access to the pools and the beach at the nearby Geisum Village.

**Geisum Village** (Map p426; ☎ 354 6692; Corniche; s/d from E£150/300; 🏠 📺 🚿) Although it's fading fast and filled to the brim with sunburnt Russians, the Geisum Village is one of the cheapest resorts in Hurghada. The rooms themselves are fairly nondescript and in need of a fresh coat of paint, though the grounds are surprisingly attractive considering the low price. The centre of the action here is the large swimming pool surrounded by a grassy lawn, though you can always take a dip in the ocean or lie on the beach (er, spot of sand).

**Triton Empire Beach** (Map p426; ☎ 354 7816; www.threecorners.com; Sharia Sayyed al-Qorayem; s/d from

### RESCUING THE RED SEA

Conservationists estimate that more than 1000 pleasure boats and almost as many fishing boats ply the waters between Hurghada and the many reefs situated within an hour of the town. Fifteen years ago, there was nothing to stop captains from anchoring to the coral, or snorkellers and divers breaking off a colourful chunk to take home. However, due largely to the efforts of the Hurghada Environmental Protection & Conservation Association (Hepca) and the Egyptian National Parks Office in Hurghada, the Red Sea's reefs are at last being protected.

Set up in 1992 by 15 of the town's larger, more reputable dive companies, Hepca's programme to conserve the Red Sea's reefs includes public-awareness campaigns, direct community action and lobbying of the Egyptian government to introduce appropriate laws. Thanks to these efforts, the whole coast south of Suez Governorate is now known as the Red Sea Protectorate. Over 570 mooring buoys have been set up at popular dive sites around Hurghada and further south, enabling boat captains to drop anchor on a buoy rather than on the coral itself, and marine rangers from the Egyptian National Parks Office police the waters.

The Egyptian National Parks Office is also trying to establish new dive sites to ease the pressure on existing sites, as well as trying to reduce the number of new boats licensed in the Red Sea. Finally, a symbolic 'reef conservation tax' of E£1 has been introduced, and is payable by anyone using the reefs for diving, snorkelling or any other boating activities. It is designed to make the public aware that the reefs and offshore islands are now protected areas, rather than simply a source of revenue.

For more information on safe diving practices or about how you can help **Hepca** (Map p428; ☎ 344 6674; www.hepca.com; off Corniche, Sigala) in its efforts to protect the Red Sea's reefs, check the organisation's website or call in between 9am and 5pm Saturday to Thursday.

## AD-DAHAR

0 300 m  
0 0.2 miles

## INFORMATION

|                                    |          |
|------------------------------------|----------|
| ATM.....                           | (see 18) |
| Al-Saffa Hospital.....             | 1 D6     |
| Banque Misr (ATM).....             | 2 B5     |
| El Baroudy Internet.....           | 3 B4     |
| Main Post Office.....              | 4 C5     |
| National Bank of Egypt (ATM).....  | (see 2)  |
| Passport & Immigration Office..... | 5 A6     |
| Public Hospital.....               | 6 C2     |
| Telephone Centrale.....            | 7 A4     |
| Thomas Cook.....                   | 8 B5     |
| Tourist Police.....                | 9 A4     |

RED SEA



## SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES

|                            |          |
|----------------------------|----------|
| Aquanaut Red Sea & Shedwan |          |
| Hotel.....                 | 10 B2    |
| Aquarium.....              | 11 B2    |
| Easy Divers.....           | (see 18) |
| Subex.....                 | 12 C2    |

## SLEEPING

|                          |       |
|--------------------------|-------|
| Cindrella Hotel.....     | 13 D2 |
| El-Arosa Hotel.....      | 14 C2 |
| Geisum Village.....      | 15 C2 |
| Sand Beach.....          | 16 C2 |
| Shakespeare Hotel.....   | 17 B3 |
| Triton Empire Beach..... | 18 C2 |

## EATING

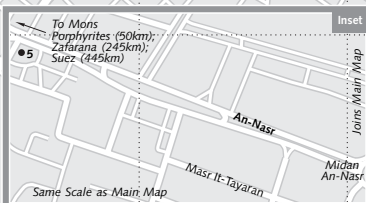
|                     |       |
|---------------------|-------|
| Chez Pascal.....    | 19 C3 |
| Gaucho.....         | 20 B2 |
| Pizza Tarboush..... | 21 B4 |
| Portofino.....      | 22 C3 |
| Red Sea I.....      | 23 B5 |
| Red Sea II.....     | 24 C3 |

## ENTERTAINMENT

|               |       |
|---------------|-------|
| Papas II..... | 25 B2 |
|---------------|-------|

## TRANSPORT

|                           |       |
|---------------------------|-------|
| Service Taxi Station..... | 26 A5 |
| Superjet Bus Station..... | 27 A3 |
| Upper Egypt Bus Co.....   | 28 D6 |



To El-Gouna Transport (500m);  
Sigala (3.5km); Resort Strip (8km);  
Airport (10.5km); Safaga (53km)

US\$45/60; 🏠 📍 🚶) Decidedly more upmarket than other accommodations in Ad-Dahar, this enormous three-star hotel caters almost exclusively to foreign tour-groups. However, there is usually space for a few independent travellers, and the recently renovated rooms make for a comfortable base. The grounds here are well-landscaped and full of lush grass, and there's even a bit of sand here for lying down and soaking up the sun.

**Sand Beach** (Map p426; 🏠 354 7992; www.sandbeachhurghada.com; Corniche; s/d from US\$55/70; 🏠 📍 🚶) One of the largest hotels in Ad-Dahar, this three-star option occupying some choice real-estate on the Corniche is a Russian favourite. The grounds here are about as expansive as they get in this part of town, and the private sand here just about qualifies as a proper beach. Of course, the atmosphere here can be a bit overwhelming if you're an independent traveller (and you don't speak Russian), though it is a decent midmarket option nevertheless.

## SIGALA

**White Albatross** (Map p428; 🏠 344 2519; walba.tros53@hotmail.com; Sharia Sheraton; s/d from ££100/180; 🏠 📍 🚶) One of the better budget hotels in the Sigala area, this no-nonsense hotel is run by a welcoming family. Standard rooms of varying degrees of sterility face out towards the street, though this is as good a base as any if you're planning on hitting the nightlife. Although you're far from the beach, you can always cross the road and drop into any of the larger resorts for a small fee.

**Zak Royal Wings Hotel** (Map p428; 🏠 344 6012; www.zakhotel.com; Sharia al-Hadaba; s/d from US\$25/35; 🏠 📍 🚶) Located next to the infamous Papas Bar, this is the best choice if you're planning on getting blotto, and don't want to stumble too far home. Rooms are slightly bare considering the price, though they're clustered around a nice pool and a tropical garden. Obviously, it can get really loud here at night, though you won't care if you're a part of the mayhem.

**Sea Garden** (Map p428; 🏠 344 7493; www.seagarden.com.eg; off Sharia Sheraton; s/d from US\$55/65; 🏠 📍 🚶) Only a few years old, this high-rise block isn't much to look at, though the Sea Garden is a discernible step-up in quality. With a three-star rating, you can expect well-cared-for rooms and a professional level of service. You're far from the beach of course, though

the pool here is one of the nicer ones on the block.

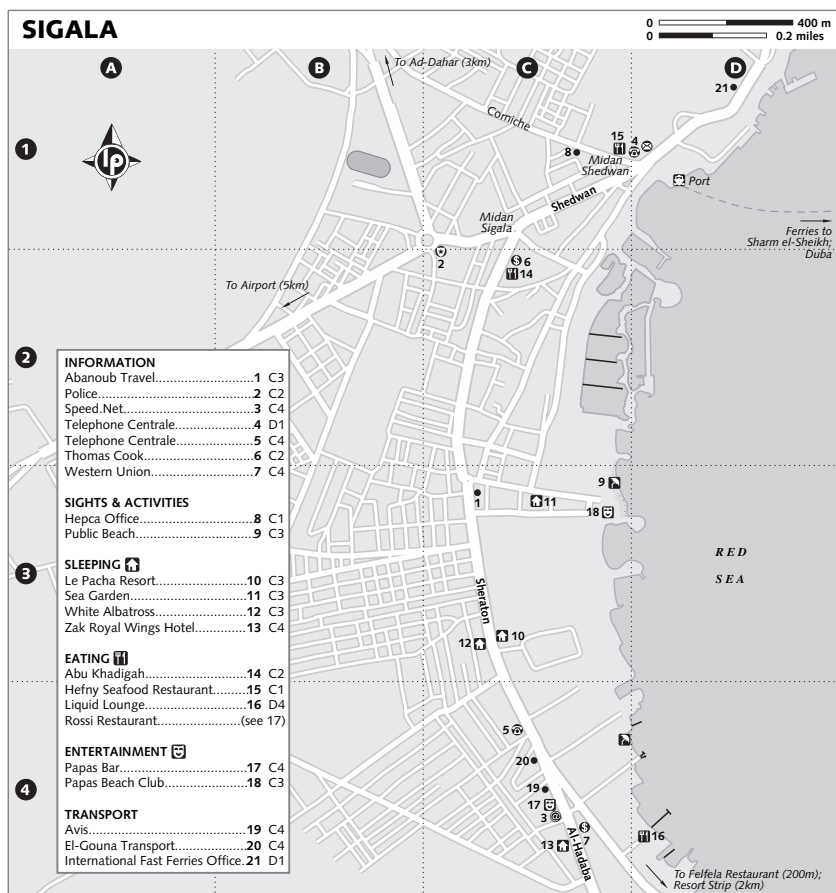
**Le Pacha Resort** (Map p428; 🏠 344 4150; www.lepacharesort.com; Sharia Sheraton; s/d from US\$70/120 with all meals; 🏠 📍 🚶) If you're looking for a comparatively cheap all-inclusive, this centrally located Sigala hotel is a good choice. Although not as upscale as the four- and five-star hotels on the resort strip, Le Pacha offers a wide range of amenities including outdoor pools, a private beach and an on-site shopping mall. If being close to the action is important, this is a good choice, though intimacy seekers might want to head further down the coast.

**Hilton Hurghada Plaza** (Map p423; 🏠 354 9745; www.hilton.com; Corniche; s/d from US\$100/125; 🏠 📍 🚶) This sprawling gated complex is five-star all the way, though if you book in advance through the web or a travel agent, it's sometimes possible to snag cheap rooms as part of a package. True to the Hilton name (we'll refrain from making any Paris jokes), service here is impeccable, and you can expect the same resort standards here as you would at any other Hilton in the world. The private beach here is also one of the nicest around, and those towering gates serve to keep all the pesky touts away.

## RESORT STRIP

**Giftun Beach Resort** (Map p423; 🏠 346 3040; www.giftunbeachresort.com; s/d all-inclusive from US\$60/85; 🏠 📍 🚶) Giftun is one of the older resorts in Hurghada. This all-inclusive place is a good choice if you're looking for low-key luxury. Unlike some of the more upmarket choices in this part of the city, the Giftun caters mostly to families and Russians looking for a cheap package holiday. Accommodation is in pleasant chalet-style rooms, and guests can take advantage of the popular onsite diving centre and windsurfing facilities.

**Jasmine Village** (Map p423; 🏠 346 0460; jasmine@tut2000.com; s/d all-inclusive from US\$75/100; 🏠 📍 🚶) Another oldie but a goodie, the Jasmine Village has also found a home among families and Russians trying to save a quick buck (or ruple). Guests stay in one of 400-plus bungalow-style rooms, which look out onto a proper beach, a stunning coral reef and the open ocean. Even if you're not staying here, the Jasmine has one of the best beaches around, and is a good place to stop by for a bit of sunbathing and snorkelling.



**Sofitel Hurghada Red Sea** (Map p423; ☎ 346 4641; www.sofitel.com; Resort Strip; s/d half board from US\$100/150; ☒ ☑ ☎ ☎) True to its high-class moniker, the Sofitel is a sophisticated and refined spot that is perfect for intimacy and seclusion. Immaculate rooms decorated in classical Arabesque-style front the deep-blue expanse of the Red Sea. The Sofitel is also brimming with amenities, including a 700m-wide beach, as well as a kids club, jogging track, tennis and squash courts and several restaurants and bars.

**Soma Bay Sheraton** (☎ 354 5845; www.sheraton-somabay.com; s/d from US\$250/350; ☒ ☑ ☎ ☎) Located 35km south of Hurghada proper, this 298-room resort is part of the Ras Abu Soma 'resort cluster', one of a number of

self-contained tourist centres being built along the coast south of Hurghada. Built in pseudo-Pharaonic style, the Sheraton boasts the typical five-star amenities including a golf course, tennis courts and a postcard-perfect beach of powdery sand. The Soma Bay is noteworthy for its continued efforts to start a Red Sea sustainable tourism initiative targeted at helping hotels become environmentally friendly.

**Oberoi Sahl Hasheesh** (☎ 344 0777; www.oberoi-hotels.com; Sahl Hasheesh; ste from US\$310; ☒ ☑ ☎ ☎) Peaceful, exclusive and opulent beyond your imagination, the Oberoi features palatial suites decorated in minimalist Moorish style. Each individually decorated accommodation comes complete with sunken marble baths,

walled private courtyards – some with private pools – and panoramic sea views. Justifiably advertised as the most luxurious destination on the Red Sea, the Oberoi is world-class, and guests here are pampered to their hearts' content.

## Eating

With its diverse ex-pat population and large pool of tourists, Hurghada has a good variety of restaurants. If you're travelling on a budget, Ad-Dahar has dozens of inexpensive local-style eateries as well as several affordable Western-style ones. Sigala – and increasingly the northern end of the Resort Strip as well – has the greatest variety of restaurants in town, with new ones opening all the time.

### AD-DAHAR

**Pizza Tarboush** (Map p426; Sharia Abdel Aziz Mustafa; pizzas ££10-20) A popular takeaway pizzeria on the edge of the souq, Tarboush has a variety of topping choices, and a few chairs on the sidewalk for those who want to dine in and scope out the street scene.

**Portofino** (Map p426; Sharia Say-yed al-Qorayem; dishes ££25-40; 🍷) A Hurghada institution, Portofino serves authentic Italian wood-fired pizzas and homemade pastas as well as a few staple Egyptian dishes including homemade tahini and baba ghanoush.

**Chez Pascal** (Map p426; Sharia Sayyed al-Qorayem; meals ££30-50; 🍷) This charming, European-style bistro is a good spot for eclectic cuisine served amid bright and clean surroundings – this is the perfect spot to savour a Turkish coffee and indulge in a bit of people-watching.

**Gaucha** (Map p426; Corniche; meals ££40-80) Sometimes you just need to feed on a huge char-grilled slab of beef, and this open-air Argentinean restaurant is the perfect spot to indulge the carnivore in all of us.

**Red Sea I** (Map p426; off Sharia an-Nasr; dishes ££20-60; 🍷) and its sister restaurant, **Red Sea II** (Map p426; Sharia Sayyed al-Qorayem; meals ££30-60), offer a wide selection of Egyptian-style seafood, steaks and poultry – check the views from the rooftop.

### SIGALA & THE RESORT STRIP

**Abu Khadigah** (Map p428; Sharia Sheraton; meals ££3-15) Patronised by an intriguing mix of workers and local businessmen as well as the odd tourist, this no-frills place is known for its kofta, stuffed cabbage leaves and other Egyptian staples.

**Hefny Seafood Restaurant** (Map p428; Sharia Shedwan; meals ££15-50; 🍷) If you're looking for an affordable spot to sample the region's famed seafood, this colourful local is just the ticket – the catch of the day is sold by weight and served with salads and rice.

**Felfela Restaurant** (Map p423; Sharia Sheraton; dishes ££15-60; 🍷 8.30am-midnight) Sitting on a gentle bend in the coastline and overlooking the turquoise sea, this branch of the Felfela chain wins a prize for vistas, which you can enjoy while dining on serviceable Egyptian classics at reasonable prices.

**Rossi Restaurant** (Map p428; Sharia Sheraton; mains ££20-50) This popular hang-out for divers and expats serves a variety of pizza toppings on crispy crusts, and pasta dishes – the service is relaxed, and women can eat by themselves without being hassled.

**Liquid Lounge** (Map p428; www.papasbar.com; Sharia Sheraton; meals ££25-40; 🍷 9am-3am) A laid-back and very hip beach bar serving lunches and dinner, including a 'liquid lunch' special (main dish plus drink) for only ££30.

## Entertainment

Thanks to its large community of resident dive instructors, tour guides, hotel employees and other foreigners, Hurghada has some of Egypt's liveliest nightlife. Almost all the three- to five-star hotels and tourist villages have one or several bars, and there are many independent places as well.

Most of the large hotels offer some sort of spectacle – usually a Russian-themed show – as well as belly-dancing performances in their clubs. For dancing, most places don't get going until at least 11pm.

The centre of nightlife in Hurghada is the **Papas Bar** (Map p428; www.papasbar.com; Sharia Sheraton, Sigala), a popular Dutch-run bar attached to Rossi Restaurant in Sigala. Filled with diving instructors and other foreign residents, it is extremely lively and has a great atmosphere most nights.

Under the same management are the very chilled-out **Liquid Lounge** (Map p428; www.papasbar.com; Sharia Sheraton, Sigala), on the beach opposite El-Tabia hotel; and **Papas II** (Map p426; www.papasbar.com; Corniche, Ad-Dahar), with a dark wooden interior, cold beers and live music several nights weekly. All feature a constantly changing entertainment program – watch for their flyers around town, or check the website.

If you're looking to get drunk and silly, the **Papas Beach Club** (Map p428; www.papasbar.com; Sigala; admission E£50; ☎ 10pm-4am) is a popular beach club that brings DJs from Europe and has regular parties.

Other popular entertainment options:

**Alf Layla wa Layla** (Map p423; Safaga rd; dinner US\$15, show US\$25; ☎ 9.30-11.30pm) This is where *The Thousand and One Nights* meets Las Vegas: a kitsch confection of brightly coloured domes and arches in which you can eat dinner while watching an equally improbable belly-dancing extravaganza.

**Black Out Disco** (Map p423; Ali Baba Palace, Resort Strip; admission Wed-Mon E£30, Tue E£60) One of the most popular dance spots in town, the Black Out is locally famous for its Ibiza-style foam nights and equally popular Ladies' Nights.

**Calypso** (Map p423; www.calypso-hrg.com; Sharia al-Hadaba, Sigala) A huge, purpose-built pleasure dome overlooking Sigala, this is the preferred nightspot for Russki dudes and divas – hedonists can easily live it up here, though it's probably wise to brush up on your Russian first.

## Shopping

Hurghada has a good selection of clothing boutiques in the small malls along the resort strip, as well as the obligatory abundance of overpriced T-shirts, hookahs, Pharaonic memorabilia, stuffed camels, etc. However, please avoid anyone selling marine curios. Stalls in the souq have been known to sell everything from stuffed sharks to lamps made from triggerfish – these are illegal and, quite frankly, would probably clash with your furniture anyway.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**EgyptAir** (Map p423; ☎ 344 3592/3; Resort Strip) has daily flights to Cairo, though prices tend to fluctuate wildly depending on the season and availability. If you book in advance, it is sometimes possible, snag a ticket for as little as E£400, though prices can climb as high as E£1000 during the busy summer and winter holiday seasons.

If you book a package holiday in either the UK or Europe, it is likely that your travel agent will arrange a charter flight directly to Hurghada for you. Even if you're an independent traveller, it's worth visiting a few travel agents before booking your ticket to Egypt – charter flights to Hurghada are often significantly cheaper than roundtrip airfares to Cairo, and the city is a quick and easy

jumping-off point for the Sinai Peninsula, Luxor and the Nile Valley.

### BOAT

Ferry tickets to Sharm el-Sheikh and to Dubai, Saudi Arabia are sold at the **International Fast Ferries office** (Map p428; ☎ 344 7571/2; www.intfastferries.com; Corniche, Sigala) behind Fantasia restaurant, opposite the Hurghada Touristic Port entrance. Several travel agencies in town, including Thomas Cook (p423) also act as ticket agents. If you're staying at a four- or five-star hotel, the concierge can also help you book tickets in advance.

The ferry to Sharm el-Sheikh departs from Hurghada at 9.30am on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday (E£250/US\$40 one way, E£450/US\$70 roundtrip, 90 minutes). Note that departure times of the Sharm el-Sheikh ferry don't correspond with bus arrivals from Luxor, so you'll need to spend at least one night in Hurghada.

The rate of the dollar against the Egyptian pound and the whim of the ferry officials determine which currency you'll need to use for the Sharm ferry ticket – come prepared with dollars as they're not always available at banks in Hurghada. To avoid this extra hassle, it's wise to book your ticket in advance through either a travel agent or your hotel.

Note that the ferry is often cancelled during winter because of windy conditions, which unfortunately strands travellers in Hurghada for longer than they intended. For this reason, it's a good idea not to buy tickets in Luxor beforehand (trying to get refunds is difficult if not impossible). If the ferry is likely to be cancelled for a few days, you can then make alternative arrangements to get to Sharm by bus or service taxi.

Although the boarding process seems to make sense to the Egyptians, the entire system is somewhat lacking in clarity to foreign travellers. For starters, it's best to arrive at the ferry port at least one hour prior to departure, which usually isn't a problem as most independent travellers are itching to escape Hurghada. First, you will need to stop by the International Fast Ferries office to pick up your boarding pass, even if you've already purchased your ticket. Several touts will attempt to walk you through the process, though it's worth shooing them away and saving your baksheesh for a drink on-board. After you pick up your boarding pass, cross the road

and wait in line – about a half hour prior to departure, you will be ushered through security before boarding the ferry.

A few words of caution about the ferry – the Red Sea can get extremely rough, so much so that the staff on-board hands out Dramamine prior to departure. If you've never had the pleasure of witnessing dozens of people simultaneously emptying out their stomach contents, you're in for a memorable trip. With that said, try to get a seat by the window, and keep your eyes fixed on the horizon – this is a great way to beat seasickness. Also note that if the seas are particularly rough, the advertised 90-minute journey can take as long as three hours.

For information on the ferry to Duba, Saudia Arabia, see p526.

## BUS

**Superjet** (Map p426; ☎ 354 4722; Sharia al-Oruba, Ad-Dahar) has daily buses to Cairo (E£60, six hours) departing at noon, 2pm, 5pm and midnight. A 2.30pm service also goes to Alexandria (E£85, nine to 10 hours).

**Upper Egypt Bus Co** (Map p426; ☎ 354 7582; off Sharia an-Nasr, Ad-Dahar) has 10 daily buses to Cairo (E£56 to E£61, six to seven hours) about every two hours from 10am to 1.30am. If you want an earlier connection to Cairo, you'll have to take your chances on getting a place on the 6am bus from Safaga, which reaches Hurghada about 7am. The 7.30pm Cairo bus goes on to Alexandria (E£75 to E£80, at least nine hours). Buses for Suez (E£35, five hours) leave almost hourly between 10am and 4pm, then at 5.30pm, 7pm, 11pm and 2am. There are daily buses to Luxor (E£55, five hours), via Safaga (E£10) and Qena (E£20), leaving at 10am, 1pm, 7pm, 10.30pm, 12.30am, 1am, 3am and 4am. The 10am, 1pm, 10.30pm and midnight services go on to Aswan (E£25 to E£32, eight hours). There is an occasional service to Luxor at 7.30pm. Services to Al-Quseir (E£20 to E£25, three hours), Marsa Alam (E£30 to E£35, five hours) and Shalatein (E£55, nine hours) leave at 1am, 3am (terminating in Marsa Alam), 5am and 8pm.

Note that the schedules the two companies listed above are the officially advertised times, though in reality, the schedules seem to change randomly. For this reason, confirm departure times at the bus station, and try to book ahead for long-distance journeys such as to Luxor and Cairo.

## SERVICE TAXI

The **service taxi station** (Map p426; off Sharia an-Nasr, Ad-Dahar) has taxis to Cairo (E£35 per person, six hours), Safaga (E£5, 45 minutes), Al-Quseir (E£10, two hours), Qena (E£15, three hours), Marsa Alam (E£25, four hours) and Suez (E£32, 3½ to four hours). Note that service taxis cannot take you to Luxor or Aswan except on a private basis in a police convoy. With bargaining, it costs about E£200 per vehicle (up to seven passengers) to Luxor. For more information on police convoys, see the boxed text, below.

## Getting Around

### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The airport is close to the resort strip. A taxi to downtown Ad-Dahar will cost between E£10 and E£25.

### CAR

There are numerous car rental agencies along Sharia Sheraton in Sigala, including **Avis** (Map p428 ☎ 344 7400).

### MICROBUS

Microbuses run throughout the day from central Ad-Dahar south to the InterContinental hotel on the resort strip (E£1), and along Sharia an-Nasr and other major routes. Short rides cost 25pt to 50pt.

**El-Gouna Transport** (Map p428; ☎ 354 1561) operates a more comfortable route (E£5) between Al-Gouna, Ad-Dahar and the end of Sharia Sheraton in Sigala about every half hour, beginning at 9am. You can flag the bus down at any point along the way and pay onboard.

### POLICE CONVOYS

Whether you're going by taxi or private car, if you're heading across to the Nile Valley, you'll be forced to go in a police convoy (see p530 for more information). They depart from the police checkpoint at the northern edge of Safaga near the start of the Qena road at 7am, 9am and 4pm, but it is always wise to confirm these times with the tourist office. There are also convoys to Cairo, departing from the police checkpoint at the Al-Gouna turn-off (20km north of Hurghada) at 2.30am, 11am and 5pm, though convoy travel on the Cairo road is often not enforced.

**TAXI**

Taxis from Ad-Dahar to the start of the resort strip (around the Marriott hotel) charge about ££15. Travelling from the bus station to the centre of Ad-Dahar, expect to pay between ££5 and ££10.

**AL-QUSEIR**

☎ 065

The historic city of Al-Quseir was founded during Pharaonic times as the launching point for boats sailing to Punt. Although nothing remains of this ancient trading port, Al-Quseir's long history and sleepy present lend it a charm absent from other towns that lie along the coast of the Red Sea. Dominated by an Ottoman fortress, lined with old coral-block buildings and home to domed tombs of various saints, mostly pious pilgrims who died en route to or from Mecca, Al-Quseir has a soothing vibe that can be difficult to find in the clamour of modern Egypt. Even if you're just passing through, it's worth spending an hour or two strolling along the waterfront, and enjoying a quiet, reflective moment.

**History**

Prior to the 10th century, Al-Quseir was one of the most important ports on the Red Sea, and a major exit point for pilgrims who were travelling to Mecca. It also served as a thriving centre of trade and export between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea and beyond. Even during its period of decline, the city remained a major settlement, and was sufficiently important for the Ottomans to fortify it in during the 16th century. Later the British beat the French for control of Al-Quseir, and for some time it was the main import channel for the spice trade from India to Britain. However, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 put an end to all this, and the town's decline accelerated, with only a brief burst of prosperity as a phosphate-processing centre in the early decades of the 20th century.

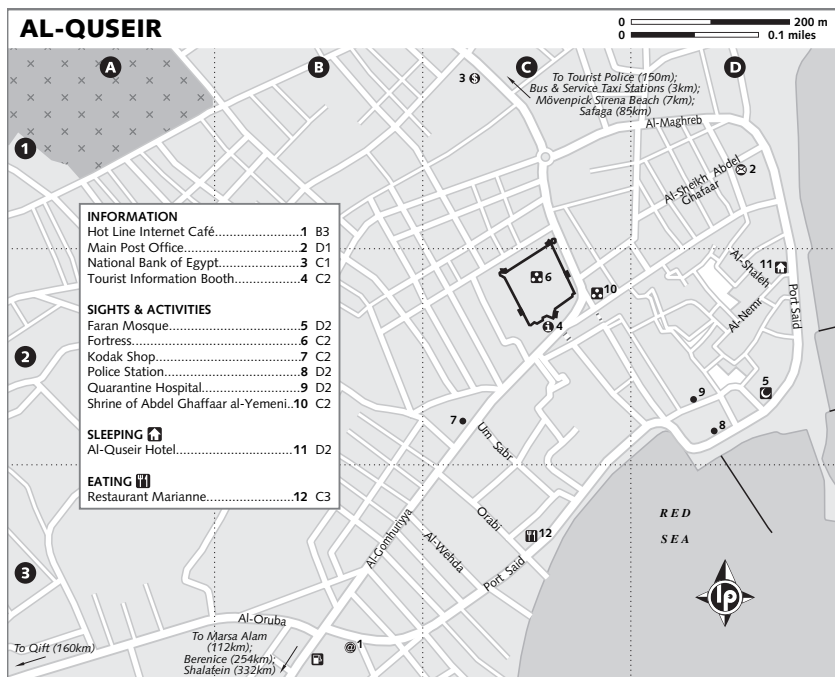
**Information**

**Hot Line Internet Café** (Sharia Port Said; per hr ££10;

☎ 9am-3am)

**Main post office** (Sharia al-Sheikh Abdel Ghaffar;

☎ 8.30am-2pm Sat-Thu)





**National Bank of Egypt** (Safaga rd; ☎ 8.30am-2pm Sun-Thu) No ATM (yet).

**Tourist police** (☎ 335 0024; Safaga rd)

## Sights

The 16th-century Ottoman **fortress** (admission E£5; ☎ 9am-5pm) is Al-Quseir's most important historical building. Much of the original structure remains intact, although it was modified several times by the French, as well as the British, who permanently altered the fortress by firing some 6000 cannonballs upon it during a heated battle in the 19th century.

Just across from the fortress is the 19th-century **shrine** of a Yemeni sheikh, Abdel Ghaffaar al-Yemeni, which is marked by an old gravestone in a niche in the wall.

A few blocks south along the waterfront is the picturesque **police station**, originally an Ottoman *diwan* (council chamber) and later the town hall. Photos aren't permitted, and it's not open to the public.

Behind here is another fortresslike building, formerly a **quarantine hospital** built during the reign of the Ottoman sultan Selim II – just next to this is the **Faran Mosque**, dating to 1704.

Running between the waterside Sharia Port Said and the main street, Sharia Al-Gomhuriyya, are numerous small lanes good for wandering around to get a glimpse of local life. One of them, **Sharia Um Sabr**, has been restored – it's best reached from a turn-off on Sharia Al-Gomhuriyya, opposite the Kodak shop.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Al-Quseir Hotel** (☎ 333 2301; Sharia Port Said; s/d E£120/160; ☎) This charismatic hotel has six simple but spacious rooms in a renovated 1920s merchant's house on the seafront. With its original narrow wooden staircase, high wooden ceilings and latticework on the windows, it's full of atmosphere, and staying here is a pleasure. There are also good views from the seafront rooms, and a tiny restaurant serving breakfast (included in the room price) and other meals on order.

**Mövenpick Sirena Beach** (☎ 333 2100; [www.movenpick-quseir.com](http://www.movenpick-quseir.com); r from US\$200; ☎) This low-set, domed ensemble 7km north of the town centre is top of the line in Al-Quseir, and one of the best resorts along the coast. Its amenities include excellent food and the

## WARNING

Some coastal areas, especially in the southern Red Sea, are mined. While these remnants of earlier conflicts are being gradually removed, they remain a threat, particularly as sites are not always marked. Avoid entering any area demarcated with barbed wire, no matter how broken or old, and if you decide to check out that secluded beach, always look for tyre tracks or footprints. Better still, check with locals.

usual five-star facilities, a Subex diving centre, quiet evenings and a refreshing absence of the glitz so common in other resort hotels. The management is known for its environmentally conscious approach, which will definitely help you to sleep easier at night.

**Restaurant Marianne** (☎ 333 4386; Sharia Port Said; dishes E£15-50) One of the best places in town to sample the bounty of the Red Sea, this local favourite serves up some seriously delicious seafood.

## Getting There & Away

The bus and service-taxi stations are next to each other about 1.5km northwest of the Safaga road (E£2 to E£3 in a taxi).

## BUS

Buses run to Cairo (E£76, 11 hours) and Hurghada (E£20 to E£25, three hours), departing at 6am, 7.30am, 9am, 7pm and 8.30pm. The 6am bus also stops at Suez. Buses to Marsa Alam (E£5 to E£10, two hours) are at 5am, 9am, 7pm and 8pm, continuing to Shalatein.

## SERVICE TAXI

Sample fares include Cairo (E£45 to E£50), Suez (E£30 to E£35) and Hurghada (E£25 to E£30). As in Hurghada, you have to hire the entire taxi for the trip to Luxor or Aswan – expect to pay from E£250 after negotiating.

## MARSA ALAM

☎ 065

The rather nondescript town of Marsa Alam is nothing more than a few scattered buildings surrounding a large army base, though this is set to change in the years to come. The area has been targeted as the site of the massive new Port Ghalib marina and resort complex being constructed near Marsa Alam airport

which, once opened, will give tourism in the region an entirely different profile.

The primary reason for this intense tourism push is simple – the seas lying just off the rugged coastline offer some of the best diving in Egypt, though up until now only serious divers have set their sights on this far-flung destination. With that said, the diving here truly is world-class, and there are a number of all-inclusive resorts in the area that serve as convenient bases for getting your feet wet.

## History

Despite its current remote location, the area around Marsa Alam has an ancient history. Gold and emeralds were once mined in the barren, mineral-rich mountains just inland, and the road leading from Marsa Alam west to Edfu in the Nile Valley follows an ancient route that was originally built by Ptolemy II. Today phosphate mining is the area's main industry, although it is fast being overtaken by tourism.

## Orientation & Information

Marsa Alam itself is little more than a T-junction where the road from Edfu meets the coastal road. Just south of the junction is a modest collection of shops, a pharmacy, a telephone centrale and a bustling market. The coast to the south and north is sprinkled with resorts.

## EMERGENCY

**Air ambulance** (☎ 010 154 1978)

**Decompression chamber** (☎ 012 218 7550, 019 510 0262, emergency VHF code 16; Marsa Shagra) 24km north of Marsa Alam.

**Tourist police** (☎ 375 0000; Quaraya Hotel, coastal rd)

## Sights & Activities

Diving and desert excursions are the main activities around Marsa Alam. For more on diving, which is primarily for experienced divers only, see p439. For more on desert safaris, see opposite.

## Sleeping

There is nowhere to stay in Marsa Alam village itself. But north and south along the coast there's an ever-growing number of four- and five-star all-inclusive resorts, plus a handful of simple, diver-oriented 'ecolodges' or diving camps. These usually consist of no-frills reed or stone bungalows, sometimes with

en-suites, generator-provided electricity, and a common area. They are run together with a dive centre, and offer a rugged alternative to the resort scene for backpackers or backpackers-at-heart.

## ECOLOGDGES

**Shaqra Eco-Lodge** (☎ 02-337 1833; [www.redsea-divingsafari.com](http://www.redsea-divingsafari.com); Marsa Shagra; tents/huts/chalets per person US\$45/55/70) This simple place owned by Hossam Helmi – lawyer, committed environmentalist and diving enthusiast – was one of the first ecolodges along the southern Red Sea coast, and remains the best. It offers simple but spotless and comfortable accommodation in a choice of two-bed tents, stone huts sharing bathroom facilities or en-suite stone chalets – all designed to be as kind to the environment as possible – plus first-rate diving. Nondivers in search of beautiful vistas and tranquillity are welcome, too. It's along the main road, 24km north of Marsa Alam.

The same owner also runs a similar camp with the same prices at **Marsa Nakari**, 18km south of Marsa Alam, plus a camp with 25 tents and 16 stone chalets in **Wadi Lahami**, a remote mangrove bay just north of Ras Banas, near Berenice and 120km south of Marsa Alam. There are live-aboards based in each of the three camps used for offshore diving. With his legal qualifications, Helmi has also developed a sideline in underwater weddings.

## ALL-INCLUSIVE RESORTS

Be advised that rooms at the following resorts listed are usually booked in advance as part of a package deal including roundtrip airfare from the UK and Europe and transfers from the airport to the resort. So, it's probably not a good idea to simply show up at the front door and request a room, though you can always stop by any of the ecolodges already listed.

Note that prices for the following all-inclusive resorts vary considerably depending on season and availability. So, it certainly pays to shop around and visit several travel agents in advance as it's sometimes possible to snag a five-star holiday at a three-star price. Also note that the listings are by no means comprehensive as this stretch of the Red Sea is currently experiencing a construction boom.

**Kahramana Beach Resort** (☎ 02-748 0883; [www.kahramanaresort.com](http://www.kahramanaresort.com); s/d all-inclusive from US\$120/200;

(☎ 📍 🚗) Located 26km north of Marsa Alam at Marsa Shagra, the Kahramana is built on two hills that surround an attractive beach. The entire complex is built of natural stone, and consists of attached chalets in shades of ochre. One of the larger complexes along this stretch of coastline, the Kahramana has a particularly festive atmosphere, which means you'll have plenty of fun above and below the water.

**Lahami Bay Beach Resort** (☎ 195 100 354; www.lahamibay.com; s/d all-inclusive from US\$135/215;

☎ 📍 🚗) Located 123km south of Marsa Alam, Lahami Bay has the distinction of being the most southerly resort on the Egyptian Red Sea. Boasting a unique fusion of Oriental and Mediterranean architecture, the Lahami Bay welcomes visitors with plush lodgings overlooking the deep-blue sea. The real attraction of this lodge is its remote location, which means that nearby reefs are about as pristine as they can come.

**Sol y Mar Solaya** (☎ 375 0015; www.solymar-hotels.com; s/d all-inclusive from US\$150/235; ☎ 📍 🚗) A plush, pleasure palace about 75km north of Marsa Alam and about 5km from the airport, this five-star resort is awash in Romanesque arches and verdant gardens. Boasting two swimming pools, a full spa complete with Jacuzzis, steam baths and saunas, and tennis courts overlooking the ocean, there are enough amenities on offer to keep nondivers entertained. Of course, you're here to dive, so don't spend too much time living the resort life.

## Eating

In town, there are a couple of cafés at the junction where you can find basic fare as well as a small supermarket with a modest selection of basics. However, all of the resorts and lodges have restaurants as well as full-board packages.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

The **Marsa Alam International Airport** is 67km north of Marsa Alam along the Al-Quseir road. There is no public transport, so you'll need to arrange a transfer in advance with your hotel. Egypt Air has indefinitely suspended its flights to/from Cairo, and the airport is currently used only by charters.

## BUS

There is no bus station in Marsa Alam. For transport to Shalatein, wait at the coffee shop next to the police post at the entrance to Marsa Alam. For transport to the Nile Valley, wait at the petrol station in Marsa Alam, or at the T-junction about 1km further along on the Edfu road.

Buses from Shalatein pass Marsa Alam en route to Aswan (E£15, six hours), via Edfu (E£12, four hours) at around 7am and 9am daily. Buses to Shalatein (E£20, four hours) come from Hurghada and depart Marsa Alam at around 5am, 7am, noon and 8.30pm.

There are four daily buses to Al-Quseir (E£5 to E£10, two hours) and Hurghada (E£30 to E£35, five hours), departing at 5am, 12.30pm, 2.30pm and 5pm. To Cairo direct, the fare is E£86 (10½ hours).

## EASTERN DESERT

The Eastern Desert – a vast, desolate area rimmed by the Red Sea Mountains to the east and the Nile Valley in the west – was once crisscrossed by ancient trade routes and dotted with settlements that played vital roles in the development of many of the region's greatest civilisations. Today the desert's rugged expanses are filled with fascinating footprints of this history, including rock inscriptions, ancient gold and mineral mines, wells and watchtowers, and religious shrines and buildings. Indeed, it is one of the highlights of any visit to the Red Sea Coast, and a world apart from the commercialised coastline.

## Orientation & Information

None of the roads crossing the desert can be freely travelled – some are completely closed to foreigners, and others require a convoy – and all the sites require a guide. As a result, it is strongly advised (in fact necessary) that you explore the Eastern Desert with the aid of an experienced tour operator.

Although second-rate travel agencies occupy every corner of the tourist hub of Hurghada (p422), it is recommended that you book a tour through **Red Sea Desert Adventures** (☎ 012 399 3860; www.redseadesertadventures.com; Marsa Shagra). This extremely professional safari outfit is run by Dutch geologist Karin Van Opstal and her Austrian partner, and offers tailor-made walking, camel and jeep safaris throughout the area. Van Opstal has lived in Marsa Alam for over a decade, and is

an authority on the local Ababda tribesmen, with whom she works closely.

Tours start at approximately US\$100 per person per day, though they vary depending on the specifications of your uniquely catered tour. Prices also vary considerably depending on the size of your party, and the time of year. In order for the necessary permits to be organised for multiday desert safaris, try to book at least one month in advance.

## Sights

One of the most impressive collections of **rock inscriptions**, many of which date to prehistoric times, is found in the barren tracts fringing the Marsa Alam–Edfu road, beginning close to Marsa Alam, where the smooth, grey rock was perfect for carving. They include hunting scenes with dogs chasing ostriches, depictions of giraffes and cattle, and hieroglyphic accounts of trade expeditions.

In the remote **Wadi Miya**, west of Marsa Alam, in what was likely an ancient mine works, are the remains of a temple said to be built by Seti I. **Wadi Sikait**, about 80km southwest of Marsa Alam, was an emerald-mining centre at least as early as the Ptolemaic period. It provided emeralds that were used throughout the ancient world and was the exclusive source of emeralds for the Roman Empire.

The high, smooth walls of **Wadi Hammamat**, about halfway along the road connecting Al-Quseir to the town of Qift, display a remarkable collection of graffiti dating from Pharaonic times down to Egypt's 20th-century King Farouk. The road through the wadi runs along an ancient trade route, and remains of old wells as well as other evidence of the area's long history can be seen along the way. In Graeco-Roman times, watchtowers were built along the trail at short enough intervals for signals to be visible, and many of them are still intact on the barren hilltops on either side of the road.

Starkly beautiful **Wadi Gimal**, which extends inland for about 85km from its coastal opening south of Marsa Alam, is home to a rich variety of birdlife, gazelles and stands of mangrove. In ancient times, the surrounding area was the source of emerald, gold and other minerals used in Pharaonic and Roman civilisations. Together with tiny Wadi Gimal Island, just offshore from the wadi's delta area, Wadi Gimal has been given protected status and targeted for development as an ecotour-

ism destination. Because of its long history and abundance of historical monuments, the area has also been proposed as a Unesco World Heritage site.

About 40km along the Safaga–Qena road, a signposted track breaks off northwest towards **Mons Claudianus**, an old Roman granite quarry/fortress complex, and one of the largest of the Roman settlements dotting the Eastern Desert. This stark and remote place was the end of the line for Roman prisoners brought to hack the granite out of the barren mountains, and was a hardship post for the soldiers sent to guard them. It was more a concentration camp than a quarry – you can still see the remains of the tiny cells that these unfortunates inhabited. There is also an immense cracked pillar, left where it fell 2000 years ago, a small temple and some other ruins. Once the granite was mined, it was carved and transported more than 200km across the desert to the Nile, from where it then was taken to the Mediterranean and the heart of the empire. The site is about 25km north of the turn-off along deteriorated tarmac.

**Mons Porphyrites** – about 40km northwest of Hurghada – is the site of ancient porphyry quarries worked by the Romans. The precious white-and-purple crystalline stone was mined and then transported across the desert along the Via Porphyrites to the Nile for use in sarcophagi, columns and other decorative work elsewhere in the Roman world. The quarries were under the direct control of the imperial family in Rome, which had encampments, workshops and even temples built for the workers and engineers here. Evidence of this quarry town can still be seen, although not much of it is standing. A road leading to the site branches off the main road about 20km north of Hurghada.

In addition to the many traces of Pharaonic and other ancient civilisations, the Eastern Desert is also home to numerous Islamic tombs and shrines. One of the best known is the tomb of Sayyed al-Shazli, a 13th-century sheikh who is revered as one of the more important Sufi leaders. His followers believe that he wanted to die in a place where nobody had ever sinned. Evidently such a place was difficult to find, as the site was a journey of several days from either the Nile Valley or the coast. Al-Shazli's tomb – which lies about 145km southwest of Marsa Alam at Wadi Humaysara – was restored under the orders of

## NOMADS OF THE EASTERN DESERT

Although the desert of the southern Red Sea may seem empty and inhospitable, the area has been home to nomadic Ababda and Besharin tribes for millennia. Members of the Beja, a nomadic tribe of African origin, they are thought to be descendents of the Blemmyes, the fierce tribesmen mentioned by classical geographers. Until well into the 20th century, the extent of the territory in which they roamed was almost exactly as described by the Romans, with whom they were constantly at war some 2000 years earlier.

Expert camel herders, the Ababda and Besharin lived a nomadic lifestyle that hardly changed until the waters of Lake Nasser rose and destroyed their traditional grazing lands. While most Besharin, many of whom do not speak Arabic, live in Sudan, most of the Arabic-speaking Ababda are settled in communities in the Nile Valley between Aswan and Luxor. A small number continue to live in their ancestral territory, concentrated in the area from Marsa Alam to Wadi Gimal, as well as on the eastern shores of Lake Nasser.

If you spend time in the region, you'll still likely see the traditional Ababda hut, lined inside with thick, hand-woven blankets, or hear Ababda music, with its rhythmic clapping and drumming and heavy use of the five-stringed lyrelike *tamboura*. At the centre of Ababda social life is *jibena* – heavily sweetened coffee prepared from fresh-roasted beans in a small earthenware flask heated directly in the coals.

Unfortunately, with the rapid expansion of tourism along the southern Red Sea, long-standing Ababda lifestyles have become increasingly threatened. Tourism has begun to replace livestock and camels as the main source of livelihood, and many Ababda men now work as guards or labourers on the resorts springing up around Marsa Alam, while others have started working with travel companies, offering camel safaris to tourists.

If you're planning a visit to the Eastern Desert, please consider the impact that you might have on these communities. On one hand, revenue from tourism can play a vital role in the development of the region, particularly if you are buying locally produced crafts or paying for the services of a local guide. However, the Eastern Desert is not a human zoo, had unfortunately indigenous tourism is often an exploitative force. Please remember that Western interests have already caused an irreversible amount of damage to the region – be aware of your surroundings, and be sensitive to the plight of the nomads.

King Farouk in 1947, and there is now an asphalt road leading to it. His *moulid* (religious festival), on the 15th of the Muslim month of Shawal, is attended by thousands of Sufis.

## Getting There & Away

With prior reservations, Red Sea Desert Adventures will organise your transport to and from the Eastern Desert as well as all of your travel between all of the sites.

## BERENICE

The military centre and small port of Berenice, 150km south of Marsa Alam, was founded in 275 BC by Ptolemy II Philadelphus. From about the 3rd to the 5th century AD, it was one of the most important harbours and trading posts on the Red Sea coast, and is mentioned in the 1st-century AD mariner's chronicle, *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*.

The ruins of the ancient town, including ruins of the **Temple of Serapis**, are located

just south of the present-day village, and have been the subject of ongoing archaeological investigations. About 100km to the northwest are ruins of the old Roman settlement of **Sikait**, which was once at the centre of major emerald-mining operations in the region.

Today the main activity is at Ras Banas peninsula – jutting into the sea just northeast of Berenice – which is an important military base. Because of this, and because of the region's proximity to the Sudanese border, independent visits are strongly discouraged – you can expect to be questioned by the tourist police, and to be accompanied by an escort even if you succeed in getting to Berenice.

There is no official accommodation, and camping needs to be cleared with the police.

Share taxis (££50, eight hours) departing from Hurghada bound for Shalatein stop in Berenice.

## SHALATEIN

This dusty outpost 90km south of Berenice marks the administrative boundary between Egypt and Sudan. With that said, Egypt considers the political boundary to be another 175km southeast, beyond the town of Halayeb, a once-important Red Sea port that has long since fallen into obscurity. Of course, Sudan strongly disagrees, resulting in a large swath of disputed territory that is probably worth avoiding in the interest of personal safety.

Now a trading post, Shalatein's colourful camel-market is a major stop on the camel-trading route from Sudan, which for many of the camels finishes in the Birqash camel market outside Cairo (p212). Amid the dust and the vendors, Rashaida tribesmen in their

lavender *galabiyyas* (men's robes) mix with Ababda, Besharin and other peoples from southern Egypt and northern Sudan.

As with Berenice, independent visitors are discouraged, and the area is sporadically closed to foreigners completely. Again, you can expect to be questioned by the tourist police, and to be accompanied by an escort even if you succeed in getting to Shalatein. However, you can easily avoid hassles by simply organising an excursion to the camel market through Red Sea Desert Adventures (for more information, see p435).

There is no official accommodation, and camping needs to be cleared with the police.

Share taxis (£55, nine hours) departing from Hurghada via Berenice terminate in Shalatein.