

Western Desert



Cairo can keep its pyramids, and Luxor can have its temples – this is the desert of deserts, an unfathomable natural wonder unlike any other. Egypt's Western Desert stretches from the Nile and the Mediterranean to the Sudanese and Libyan borders, rolling far into Africa oblivious to any lines drawn on the map. The Great Sand Sea starts here, a formidable khaki ocean undulating with some of the largest sand dunes on earth.

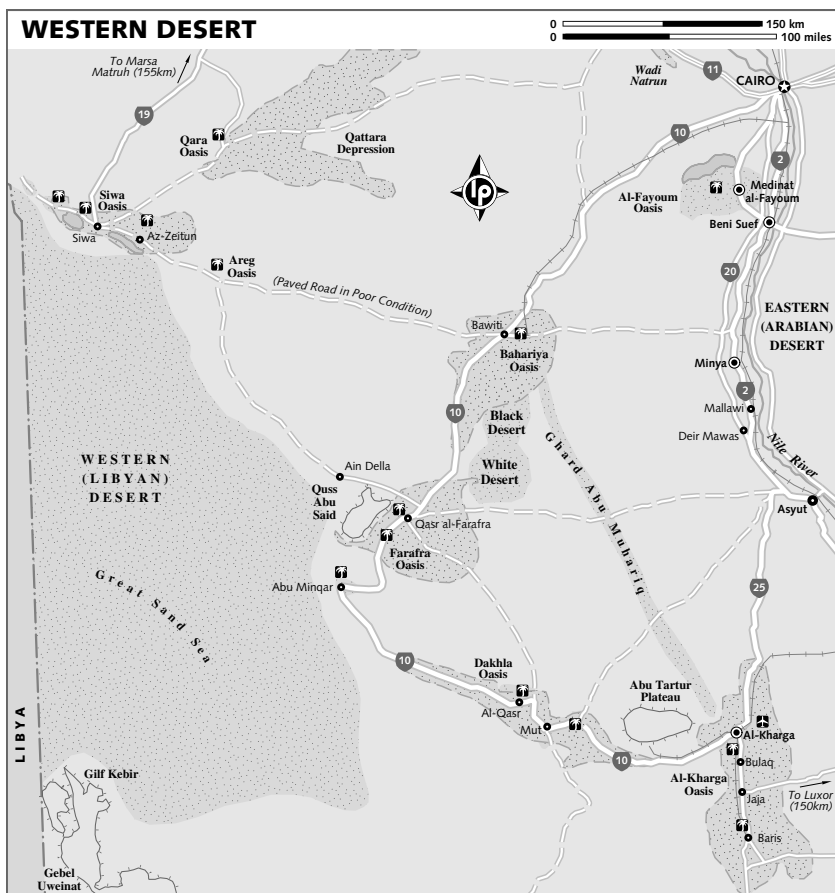
This desolate region is punctuated with five major oases boasting freshwater sources and supporting islands of verdant greenery. The valley floors lie speckled with crumbling Roman forts, once towering protectively over ancient caravan routes as they wound their way across North Africa. Flourishing palm plantations engulf medieval towns, and it's here out west that you will find the eerie rock formations of the White Desert, a dreamscape of eroded, snow-white pinnacles. Nearby, you can explore the charred mountains of the Black Desert, and bathe in innumerable crystal-clear springs as they gush from the valley floor. Away from the popular desert circuit road lies happily isolated Siwa, a tranquil paradise of springs and ancient ruins thickly carpeted with date palms.

Not many travellers peel themselves away from the popular Nile Valley routes to make the dusty trip out west. It's a shame. Paved roads now connect the oases, and while travel in this region takes time, the Western Desert offers some of the most jaw-dropping scenery and photogenic journeys in all Egypt.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Sleep under the blazing desert stars amid the unreal chalk-rock formations of the **White Desert** (p347)
- Soak in the tranquil, old-world ambience and unique culture of breathtaking **Siwa Oasis** (p355)
- Dip into one of the numerous cool and hot **natural springs** (see boxed text, p341) that lie peppered around the oases
- Wonder at the crumbling ruins of the medieval mud-brick fortified towns that protected oasis dwellers from marauding desert tribes in **Al-Qasr** (p342)
- Scramble over the ruins of Roman forts and the oldest Christian cemetery in the world around **Al-Kharga Oasis** (p331)
- Take the ultimate desert adventure, a multiday safari into the foreboding **Great Sand Sea** (p367) and beyond





History

As with the Sahara and other deserts that stretch across northern Africa, the Western Desert was once a savannah that supported all manner of wildlife. Giraffes, lions and elephants roamed here in Palaeolithic times, when the landscape is thought to have looked much like the African Sahel. All that you see in the desert – the huge tracts of sand, the vast gravel plains, the fossil beds and limestone rocks – were once the happy hunting grounds that supported nomadic tribes. Gradual climate change led to desertification and turned this vast area into the arid expanse seen today. Only depressions in the desert floor have enough water to support wildlife, agriculture and human settlement.

The ancient Egyptians understood the nature of the desert, which they saw as being synonymous with death and exile. Seth, the god of chaos who killed his brother Osiris, was said to rule here. Despite their fears, it is believed the ancient Egyptians did maintain links with the oases throughout the Pharaonic era although so far, with the exception of Dakhla Oasis, there is scant evidence of this before the Third Intermediate Period. But with the accession of a Libyan dynasty (22nd dynasty, 945–715 BC), focus moved to the west and the oases, with caravan routes to the Nile Valley. Many monuments in Al-Kharga and Bahariya date from this period.

The oases enjoyed a period of great prosperity during Roman times, when new wells

and improved irrigation led to a vast increase in the production of wheat and grapes for export to Rome. Prosperity was also encouraged by provincial army units, usually consisting of non-Romans serving under Roman officers, which protected the oases and trade routes. Garrisoned fortresses can still be seen in the desert around Al-Kharga and Bahariya, and Roman-era temples and tombs lie scattered across all the oases.

When the Romans withdrew from Egypt, the trade routes became unsafe and were a target for attacking nomadic tribes. Trade suffered, the oases went into gradual decline, and the population of settlements shrank. By medieval times, raids by nomads were severe enough to bring Mamluk garrisons to the oases. The fortified villages built to defend the population can still be seen in Dakhla (Al-Qasr, Balat) and Siwa (Shali).

But even the gradual cessation of attacks and the growing power of the pashas in Cairo during the 19th century could not revive the prosperity of ancient times. Although the oases remained important bulwarks against any threat to Egypt's western flank, the difficulty of travel through the desert meant they remained isolated agricultural communities until the arrival of motor vehicles and paved roads.

The biggest change to the oases after the departure of the Romans occurred in 1958, when President Nasser created the New Valley to relieve population pressure along the Nile. Roads were laid between the previously isolated oases and an administration was established. The New Valley Governorate is the largest in Egypt and one of the least densely populated: although conditions were right for people to migrate to the New Valley, there has never been enough work to attract significant numbers.

Climate

The ideal time to visit the Western Desert is in late autumn or early spring. During the summer season, temperatures can soar as high as 52°C and although there is little humidity, the heat can be withering. Winter is very pleasant with average daytime highs of 20°C to 25°C, although it can get very cold (down to 0°C at times) at night. Winds, particularly the hot, dry wind of April known as the khamsin, can present great problems for desert travellers.

Long-Range Desert Safaris

Going on safari in the Western Desert can be one of the most rewarding experiences Egypt has to offer. It can also be one of the most frustrating. Each area has its local guides and experts, though many of them operate on a shoestring and have neither the expertise nor the equipment to pull off a long-range safari. This won't stop guides from trying to persuade you they can do it. Journeys to the remote Gifl Kebir (in Egypt's southwest corner) and the Great Sand Sea need organisation, reliable equipment and plenty of experience. There are risks, and people do die in the desert each year. Military permits, which are available locally for short desert treks, must be procured in Cairo for longer trips.

The following safari operators have solid international reputations, are among the more reliable in Egypt, and will treat the desert with the respect it deserves. Expect prices to be considerably higher than those of the many smaller, local outfits.

Al-Badawiya (☎ 02-575 8076; www.badawiya.com)

The three Ali brothers are Bedouin from Farafra, who have built up a significant business operating out of their Al-Badawiya Hotel and an office in downtown Cairo. With considerable experience in the Western Desert, they can mount tailored camel or jeep safaris from three to 28 days. They have tents, cooking equipment and bedding.

Dabuka Expeditions (6085 987 9896; www.dabuka.de) Dabuka is a German-based company that specialises in North African desert travel, not only through Egypt but also through Libya, Sudan, Tunisia and Jordan. In Egypt it arranges multiday safaris into the Great Sand Sea, Gebel Oweinat and Gifl Kebir, as well as organising camel expeditions and running off-road driving courses.

Egypt Off Road (☎ 010 147 5462; www.egyptoffroad.com) Egypt Off Road is one of the most highly recommended desert tour operators in Egypt. Many expat desert rats swear by owner, Peter Gaballa, who taught them how to drive in the desert. Peter is an excellent car mechanic and speaks Arabic, French, English and German fluently. He organises driving lessons in the desert and trips to the Western Desert oases, as well as more serious two-week expeditions to the Gifl Kebir and the Great Sand Sea.

Hisham Nessim (☎ 012 780 7999; www.raid4x4egypt.com) Rally driver and owner of the Aquasun hotels in Farafra and Sinai, Hisham Nessim has been driving in the desert for many years. With satellite phones, GPS and six 4WDs specially rigged for long-range desert travel, he is prepared to go to all corners of Egypt. He offers five programmes (including self-drive) of seven to 14 days, or will tailor-make tours.

OASES FOR BEGINNERS

So what exactly is an oasis? An isolated pocket of fertile tract surrounded by arid desert and supported by a natural water source – that’s what. Water is available in these strips of vegetation since the oasis surface lies closer to the water table here than in surrounding areas, allowing natural springs to form. Each of the oases found in the Western Desert lies in a depression, the deepest of which is the Qattara depression at 134m below sea level.

Oases were vital to the old trade routes, as cross-desert caravans needed to stop to replenish valuable food and water supplies. Political control of an oasis often led to great prosperity from the lucrative commerce that passed through these well-trodden paths.

Khalifa Expedition (☎ 012 321 5445; www.khalifaexp.com) Khaled and Rose-Maria Khalifa have been running camel and jeep tours throughout the Western Desert from their base in Bahariya Oasis for well over a decade. Rose-Maria is a qualified speech therapist and foot masseuse, which perhaps explains why they also offer meditation tours for people more interested in communing with nature than looking at antiquities.

Pan Arab Tours (☎ 02-418 4409/419; www.panarab-tours.com) With more than 30 years’ experience, Pan Arab Tours has developed expertise in taking visitors into Egypt’s deserts. Used by archaeologists as well as tourists, the company has a number of specially equipped vehicles and offers six itineraries throughout the country, from two to eight days.

Zarzora Expedition (☎ 02-761 8105; www.zarzora.com) Captained by the very experienced Ahmed Al-Mestekawi, a retired colonel who used to conduct military desert patrols, Zarzora does expeditions to Siwa, Gifl Kebir and the Great Sand Sea. Ahmed has in-depth knowledge of the area and moonlights as a lecturer on the desert’s environment and history.

AL-KHARGA OASIS

☎ 092 / pop 74,940

As the closest of the oases to the Nile Valley, Al-Kharga used to have the unenviable role as a place of banishment for mischievous Nile Valley citizens. Its remote location, punishing summer heat and destructive winds mean the oasis was synonymous with misery and exile. It may seem strange then that its chief town, Al-Kharga, was chosen as the capital of the New Valley Governorate in the 1950s. Life in

the oasis has improved somewhat since then, and with a smattering of fascinating ancient sites it’s a worthwhile stopover.

Lying in a 220km-long and 40km-wide depression, Al-Kharga Oasis was at the crossroads of vital desert trade routes, including the famous Darb al-Arba’een (Forty Days Rd; see boxed text, p333). Al-Kharga’s influential location brought it great prosperity, and the arrival of the Romans improved things as wells were dug, crops cultivated and fortresses built to protect caravan routes from attacking desert nomads. Even as late as the 1890s British forces were using lookout towers here to safeguard the ‘back door’ into Egypt. Today, attempts at modernising Wadi el-Gedid (the New Valley) with environmentally questionable land-reclamation efforts and intensive agriculture pose a bigger threat to the area than pillaging clans ever did.

Al-Kharga

The busy city of Al-Kharga is the largest town in the Western Desert and also the poster-child of the government’s efforts to modernise the oases. Unfortunately, visitors are unlikely to see the town’s drab housing blocks and wide, bare highways as much of an improvement.

Still, the town makes a good base to explore some of the remarkable, gently crumbling sights found around this oasis valley floor. There’s a fine museum to check out, and a walk through the scruffy streets of the old *souq* (market) is a worthwhile distraction. To visit most of the Graeco-Roman sights, however, you’ll need to arrange your own transport (see p333).

Although there is no record of trouble in the oasis, at the time of our visit foreigners were encouraged to take police escorts around town and to nearby sights.

ORIENTATION

Al-Kharga is fairly spread out, with the bus station in the southeast near the *souq* and crumbling old centre, and most of the hotels a fair hike away. If you’re coming from Dakhla, you may want to be let off early at Sharia al-Adel.

INFORMATION

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 123)

Tourist police (Map p332; ☎ 792 1367; Sharia Gamal Abdel Nasser)

Internet Access**Governorate Information Support Centre**

(Map p332; ☎ 792 6973; Governorate Bldg, Sharia Gamal Abdel Nasser; ☎ 8am-3pm & 6pm-midnight Sat-Thu)

Internet café (Map p332; ☎ 793 0722; off Midan Sho'ala; per hr E£10; ☎ 8am-2pm & 4-11pm)

Medical Services

General hospital (Map p332; ☎ 792 0777; Sharia Basateen)

Money

Pioneers Hotel (p334) has an ATM.

Banque du Caire (Map p332; off Sharia Gamal Abdel Nasser) Very slow service, but there is an ATM.

Banque Misr (Map p332; Dakhla rd)

Post & Telephone

Private telephone shops are sprinkled all over Al-Kharga.

Main post office (Map p332; Sharia Abdel Moniem Riad; ☎ 8am-2.30pm Sat-Thu)

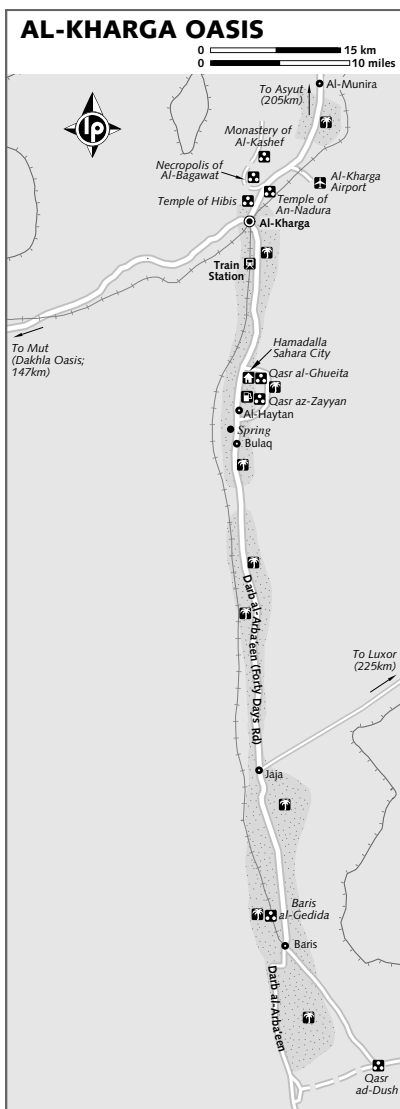
Telephone centrale (Map p332; Sharia al-Gomhuriyya; ☎ 24hr)

Tourist Information

New Valley Tourist Office (Map p332; ☎ 792 1206; syaha2007@yahoo.com; Midan Nasser; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Sat-Thu) Tourism Manager Ibrahim Hassan and his crew are very helpful. Several members of staff help arrange private transport to local sights.

SIGHTS**Al-Kharga Museum of Antiquities**

This two-storey **museum** (Map p332; Sharia Gamal Abdel Nasser; adult/student E£25/15; ☎ 8am-5pm) is housed in a cavernous, well-lit building made from local bricks and designed to resemble the architecture of nearby Bagawat. Inside is a small but interesting selection of archaeological finds from around Al-Kharga and Dakhla Oases. There's a particularly good selection of prehistoric objects, flints, ostrich eggs and tools tracing the prehistory of the oases in both English and Arabic. There's also a smattering of objects from Pharaonic, Greek and Roman antiquities. One fascinating find is a collection of wooden Roman panels (early versions of post-it notes) detailing farmer's accounts, marriages and contracts of the time. Also look for the exquisite false-door stele of 6th-dynasty governor Khent-ka (c 2700 BC) with the earliest known reference to Dakhla Oasis.



The upper floor contains objects from the Coptic, Islamic and Ottoman eras, with some fascinating jewellery, books, coins and textiles.

Temple of Hibis

The town of Hebet ('the Plough', now corrupted into Hibis) was the capital of the oasis

in antiquity, but all that remains today is the well-preserved limestone **Temple of Hibis** (Map p331; adult/student E£25/15; ☎ 8am-5pm Oct-Apr, 8am-6pm May-Sep). Once sitting on the edge of a sacred lake, the temple was dedicated to the Theban god triad of Amun-Re, Mut and Khons. Construction of the temple began during the 25th dynasty, though the decorations and a **colonnade** were added over the next 300 years.

An **avenue of sphinxes** leads to a series of gateways, the colonnade of Nectanebo and then to a **court**, a **hypostyle hall** and an **inner sanctuary**. One of the reliefs in the hypostyle hall shows the god Seth battling with the evil serpent Apophis – an archetype of the St George and the dragon motif. Among the graffiti left by 19th-century European travellers is a lengthy inscription from 1818 by Frederic Cailliaud, who claimed to have been the first European to see the temple.

The temple is in the process of been renovated and restored to its original location after a bungled attempt to move it elsewhere to protect it from rising groundwater. It's 2km north of town just to the left of the main road;

pick-ups (50pt) heading to Al-Munira pass this way.

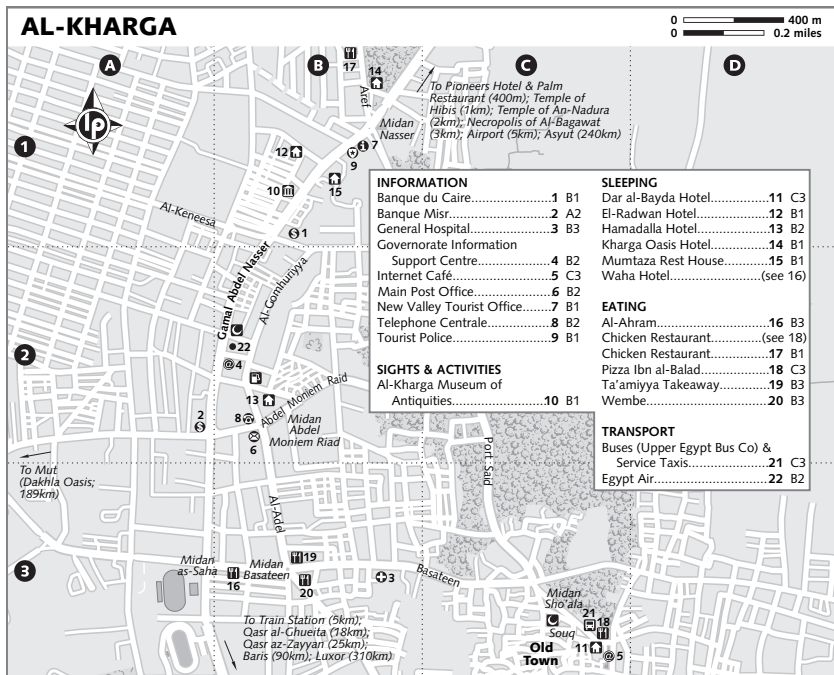
Temple of An-Nadura

Located on a hill off the main road at the north end of town, the **Temple of An-Nadura** (Map p331; admission free) has strategic views of the area and once doubled as a fortified lookout. It was built during the reign of Roman emperor Antoninus Pius (AD 138–161) to protect the oasis, and inside you will find the remains of a sandstone temple with hieroglyphic inscriptions. It later housed a Coptic church and was used as a fortress by the Ottomans.

The site is badly ruined, but the superb vistas are ideal for sunset adulation. The ruins lie perched on a rise off to the right of the main road before the Temple of Hibis.

Necropolis of Al-Bagawat

It may not look like much from afar, but this **Necropolis** (Map p331; adult/student E£25/15; ☎ 8am-5pm Oct-Apr, 8am-6pm May-Sep) is one of the earliest surviving and best-preserved Christian cemeteries in the world. About 1km north



THE WAY OF DUSTY DEATH

Al-Kharga Oasis sits atop what was once the only major African north–south trade route through Egypt's Western Desert: the notorious Darb al-Arba'een, or Forty Days Rd. A 1721 km track linking Fasher in Sudan's Darfur Province with Asyut in the Nile Valley, this was one of Africa's great caravan trails, bringing the riches of Sudan – gold, ivory, skins, ostrich feathers and especially slaves – north to the Nile Valley and beyond to the Mediterranean. It's thought to date back to the Old Kingdom, and the richness of the merchandise transported along this bleak track was such that protecting it was a priority. The Romans invested heavily here, building a series of fortresses – such as Qasr ad-Dush (p336), the Monastery of Al-Kashef (below) and Qasr al-Ghueita (p335) – to tax the caravans and try to foil the frequent raids by desert tribesmen and, on occasion, Nubians.

Despite the dangers, Darb al-Arba'een flourished until well into the Islamic era, by which time it was Egypt's main source of slaves. Untold numbers of tragic human cargo died of starvation and thirst on the journey north. According to 19th-century European travellers, slavers travelled in the intense summer heat, preferring to expose their merchandise to dehydration on what British geographer GW Murray (author of the 1967 *Dare Me to the Desert*) called 'the way of dusty death', rather than risk the possibility of bronchitis and pneumonia from the cold desert winter.

Despite repeated attempts by the British to suppress the trade, slaves were brought north until Darfur became part of Sudan at the beginning of the 20th century. The Darb al-Arba'een withered and today its route has been all but lost.

of the Temple of Hibis, it's built on the site of an earlier Egyptian necropolis, with most of the 263 mud-brick tombs appearing to date from the 4th to the 6th centuries AD. While many of the domed Coptic tombs are fairly plain, a few have vivid murals of biblical scenes inside and some have ornate façades. The **Chapel of Peace** has figures of the Apostles on the squinches of the domes, just visible through Greek graffiti. The **Chapel of the Exodus**, one of the oldest tombs, has the best-preserved paintings, including the Old Testament story of Moses leading the children of Israel out of Egypt, which is visible through some 9th-century graffiti. Another large family tomb (No 25) has a mural of Abraham sacrificing Isaac, and the smaller **Chapel of the Grapes** (Anaeed al-Ainab) is named after the images of grapevines that cover the walls. A guardian will be anxious to guide you to some of the more colourful tombs, he should be tipped (around £5).

Monastery of Al-Kashef

Dominating the cliffs to the north of Al-Bagawat is the ruined Monastery of Al-Kashef (Deir al-Kashef; Map p331), named after Mustafa al-Kashef, a tax collector, and strategically placed to overlook what was one of the most important crossroads of the Western Desert – the point where the Darb al-Ghabari from Dakhla crossed the Darb

al-Arba'een. The magnificent mud-brick remains date back to the early Christian era, although the site was occupied as early as the Middle Kingdom. Once five storeys high, much of it has collapsed but you can see the tops of the arched corridors that crisscrossed the building. To get here, walk or drive on the left-hand track from the Necropolis of Al-Bagawat for about 1km.

TOURS

Al-Kharga has few outfits offering desert trips, although there has been continual talk of agencies setting up shop in the near future (*inshallah*). Some of the staff at the tourist office moonlight as impromptu guides and can help organise transport for the day, but unfortunately there is a dearth of overnight trips on offer. For more information on longer desert trips, see p329.

SLEEPING Hotels

You'd better recalibrate your hotel expectations for Al-Kharga before you arrive as, with a couple of exceptions, the choices are a little sad. On the up-side, many places are nearly empty year-round, so getting a room is never a problem!

Waha Hotel (Map p332; ☎ 792 0393; Sharia an-Nabawi; s/d without bathroom ££12/14, s/d ££20/30) This is the cheapest digs in a town low on options. This

four-storey hotel has basic, dingy rooms and whiffy shared toilets – splurge on a private bathroom. Bonus: you can clamber up on the roof for sweeping views of the surrounding valley.

Mumtaza Rest House (Map p332; ☎ 792 1206; fax 792 1205; Sharia Gamal Abdel Nasser; dm £20; ♿) Fresh from a round of renovations, the carpeted chalets of this government rest house are a pretty good deal by Al-Kharga standards. It's often being used by government officials, so it's best to call ahead to check availability (reservations are made through the tourist office, p331).

Hamadalla Hotel (Map p332; ☎ 792 0638; fax 792 5017; off Sharia Abdel Moniem Riad; s/d ££40/55, with air-con ££65/85; ♿) A hotel popular with overland tour groups, Hamadalla has rooms that are clean but dark, gloomy and garnished with ruffled furniture. There are a number of different room configurations, so ask to see a few. It sometimes sells Stella beer.

Dar al-Bayda Hotel (Map p332; ☎ 792 9393; Midan Sho'ala; s/d without bathroom ££40/60, s/d ££60/90, with bathroom & air-con ££75/120; ♿) A shabby place just to the left off Midan Sho'ala, where the buses and service taxis are based, so it's handy for late arrivals or if you're toting a lot of luggage. Most rooms have fans but can be noisy and, frankly, are overpriced.

El-Radwan Hotel (Map p332; ☎ 792 1716, 012 747 2087; off Sharia Gamal Abdel Nasser; s/d ££50/80; ♿) There's a good welcome (though not in English) at the Radwan, which is beside the Town Hall and well located for the Museum of Antiquities and the tourist office. The rooms are dark and worn, but reasonably kept and off the main road.

Pioneers Hotel (off Map p332; ☎ 792 9751-3; www.solymar.com; Sharia Gamal Abdel Nasser; s/d half board from ££6/84; ♿) An apt name: these guys pioneered the concept of luxury resorts in the Western Desert, though few hotels have followed their lead. While the salmon-pink, low-rise construction is reminiscent of a hollowed-out sponge cake, the hotel does offer a level of comfort that was until recently unimaginable in the oases: a swimming pool, fitness area, outdoor Bedouin-style café, ATM, billiards and a children's playground all connected by ridiculously lush grass. It is the only place in Al-Kharga where you can count on getting alcohol.

Kharga Oasis Hotel (Map p332; ☎ 792 4940; Midan Nasser; s/d ££70/95; ♿) Another modern homage to concrete, the 1960s Kharga Oasis nonetheless

proffers the best-value nap in town. A favourite stopping-off point for desert adventurers, it sports generous and comfortable midpriced rooms, friendly, courteous staff and has a lush, palm-filled garden and terrace. By the time you read this, construction of some lovely traditional mud-brick bungalows in the palm groves should have been completed – these will definitely be worth a look.

Hamadalla Sahara City (Map p331; ☎ 762 0240; Kharga–Dush rd; s/d ££85/110; ♿) Hamadalla Sahara City shimmers like a gussied-up, garish pink-and-yellow mirage in the open desert, 15km south of Al-Kharga. Set around an urban-like hotel complex, it has domed bungalows clustered in small groups, each sporting neat, agreeable rooms with private bathrooms. It's a pain to get to without your own wheels, but the views of the desert rising over nearby Qasr al-Ghueita are damned impressive.

Camping

Kharga Oasis Hotel (Map p332; ☎ 792 4940; Midan Nasser; per person £13) The palm grove out the back of this hotel is your best bet in town for sleeping under your own canvas. You can use the hotel's toilet and shower facilities, but be warned that the garden breeds aberrantly large swarms of mosquitoes at night.

EATING

If your palate needs a break from the staple Egyptian trinity of chicken, *fuul* (fava bean paste) and *ta'amiyya* (mashed, deep-fried fava beans), you'd be best to head for one of the better hotels. Otherwise, there's a smattering of basic eateries around Midan Sho'ala, Sharia al-Adel and near Midan Basateen. There's a cheap chicken restaurant a few doors down from the bus station, and another at the northern end of town.

Pizza Ibn al-Balad (Map p332; Midan Sho'ala; pizzas ££6-20) Strike us down if this place doesn't serve some of the best darned *fiteer* (Egyptian pizza/pancake) in the oases. Deservedly, it's one of the most popular places to eat. Choose from cheese, veggie and tuna or beef toppings.

Al-Ahram (Map p332; Waha Hotel, Sharia an-Nabawi; meals ££8-20) A small, friendly place serving roast chicken and *kofta* (spiced minced meat grilled on a skewer) accompanied by modest salads and vegetable dishes.

Wembe (Map p332; Midan Basateen; meals ££8-24) This busy local eatery gets the thumbs up from people who are qualified to give such ratings,

and serves the usual Egyptian comestibles: grilled meats, salads, rice and vegetables.

Palm Restaurant (off Map p332; ☎ 792 9751-3; fax 792 7983; Pioneers Hotel, Sharia Gamal Abdel Nasser; buffet dinner €10) If there is a group staying here, dinner tends to be a buffet; otherwise the restaurant offers an à la carte selection of Continental dishes. None of the cooking here is particularly inspiring, but this is one of the best dining experiences to be had in Al-Kharga.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

The airport is 5km north of town. While **EgyptAir** (Map p332; ☎ 790 1334; Sharia Gamal Abdel Nasser) has been talking for years of restarting flights to Al-Kharga, the Petroleum Surface Company has beaten it to it. The latter has tentatively scheduled Sunday flights on a 15-seat plane, leaving Cairo at 8am and returning from Al-Kharga at 4pm (€50 one-way, 1½ hours). Contact the tourist office (p331) for schedules and bookings.

Bus

Upper Egypt Bus Co (Map p332; ☎ 792 0838; Midan Sho'ala) operates buses to Cairo (E£51, eight to 10 hours) at 7am, 9.30pm and 11pm. The 7am bus goes via Asyut and takes the Nile Valley agricultural road, lengthening the trip but allowing stops in Minya or Beni Suef.

There are several buses bound for Asyut (E£9 to E£10, three to four hours) leaving at 6am, 7am, 11am, 2pm and 9pm. There are 8.30am and 11.30am services that originate in Dakhla.

Local buses to Baris (E£3, one hour) leave at 7am and 2pm.

At the time of writing, regular bus services to Luxor were suspended due to lack of demand. To get to Luxor you could either catch a bus to Asyut and change there, or hire a private taxi (see below).

Service Taxi

The **service taxi station** (Map p332; Midan Sho'ala) is next to the bus station. Most of the vehicles are minibuses but there are also a few Peugeot station wagons. Destinations include Asyut (E£10, three to four hours) and Dakhla (E£10, three hours).

Taxi

Thanks to the new road, special taxis can get you to Luxor (via Jaja) in three hours, but will

set you back E£350. Cairo (six to seven hours) costs E£600 for the car (maximum seven people), but expect a long, hot, cramped ride.

Train

Al-Kharga's train station (Map p331), on the road south to Baris, reflects government ambitions for the place, with impressive Islamic architecture featuring a domed ceiling and marble interior. Alas the service doesn't live up to the dream: there is one weekly departure, on Friday at 7.30am (E£11/10.25 for 2nd/3rd class), sometimes. The ticket office reckons on eight to 10 hours to cover the 477km. Be prepared for at least 12 hours. To get to the station, take any micro or bus heading for Baris or a taxi (E£5).

GETTING AROUND

Minibuses (50pt) run along the main streets of Al-Kharga, especially Sharia Gamal Abdel Nasser. Outside the town, covered pick-up trucks go to the villages along the road south to Baris. Expect to pay around E£1.50 to E£2.

South to Baris

A good asphalt road heads south of Al-Kharga to Baris, the southernmost town in the Western Desert. As you follow the road there are a number of easily accessible sights, all of which are shown on the Al-Kharga Oasis map (p331).

QASR AL-GHUEITA & QASR AZ-ZAYYAN

It is easy to see why the Romans chose this site, some 18km south of Al-Kharga, for **Qasr al-Ghueita** (adult/student E£20/10; ☎ 8am-5pm Oct-Apr, 8am-6pm May-Sep). The imposing Roman mud-brick fortress has survived millennia and still dominates the road to Baris. The massive outer walls enclose a 25th-dynasty sandstone temple, dedicated to the Theban triad Amun, Mut and Khons. In later centuries, the fortress served as the perimeter for a village, with some houses surviving along the outer wall. Within the hypostyle hall, a series of reliefs show Hapy, the potbellied Nile god, holding symbols of the nomes (provinces) of Upper Egypt.

The fortress' name translates as Fortress of the Small Garden, which seems an unlikely name for a place surrounded by desert. But in antiquity, Qasr al-Ghueita was the centre of a fertile agricultural community renowned for its grapes: tomb inscriptions in Thebes

mention the quality of the Ghueita grapes. An asphalt road leads 2km to the temple from the main road.

About 7km further south are the remains of **Qasr az-Zayyan** (adult/student ££20/10; ☎ 8am-5pm Oct-Apr, 8am-6pm May-Sep), another fortress enclosing a temple. Unlike many of the sights in this oasis, the fort is still situated beside a small but thriving village.

If you don't have a vehicle you can get to the temples by taking a bus heading for Baris (see p335) or a covered pick-up going to Bulaq (££1). There is an asphalt road linking the two temples, but 7km is a long hike if you're on foot – be sure to take plenty of water.

BARIS

Baris, 90km south of Al-Kharga, was once one of the most important trading centres along the Darb al-Arba'een, but there is little left to remind you of that. Other than a few kiosks selling *fuul* and *ta'amiyya*, there is little of note apart from the mud-brick houses of **Baris al-Gedida**, about 2km north of the original town. Hassan Fathy, Egypt's most influential modern architect, designed the houses using traditional methods and materials and intended Baris al-Gedida to be a model for other new settlements. Work stopped at the outbreak of the Six Day War of 1967 and only two houses and some public spaces have ever been completed.

About 13km to the southeast of Baris is **Qasr ad-Dush** (adult/student ££20/10; ☎ 8am-5pm Oct-Apr, 8am-6pm May-Sep), an imposing Roman temple-fortress completed around AD 177 on the site of the ancient town of Kysis. Dush was a border town strategically placed at the intersection of five desert tracks and one of the southern gateways to Egypt. It may also have been used to guard the Darb al-Dush, an east-west track to the Esna and Edfu temples in the Nile Valley. As a result it was solidly built and heavily garrisoned, with four or five more storeys lying underground. A 1st-century sandstone temple abutting the fortress was dedicated to Isis and Serapis. The gold decorations that once covered parts of the temple and earned it renown have long gone, but there is still some decoration on the inner stone walls.

Baris is not an ideal place to stay the night and you're better off staying at or near Al-Kharga.

Getting There & Away

There are buses between Al-Kharga and Baris (££3, two daily), leaving from Al-Kharga at 7am and 2pm, and from Baris at 6am and noon. The frequent minibuses and pick-up trucks are a more convenient option between Al-Kharga and Baris, and cost about ££3. To cover the 15km between Qasr ad-Dush and Baris, negotiate a special ride with a covered pick-up, usually available for ££20 to ££30, depending on the waiting time.

DAKHLA OASIS

☎ 092 / pop 79,810

With more than a dozen fertile hamlets sprinkled along the Western Desert circuit road, Dakhla lives up to most visitors' romantic expectations of oasis life. Lush palm groves and orchards support traditional villages, where imposing, ancient mud-brick forts still stand guard over the townships and allude to their less tranquil past.

The region has been inhabited since prehistoric times, with fossilised bones hinting at human habitation dating back 150,000 years. In Neolithic times, Dakhla was the site of a vast lake and rock paintings show that elephants, zebra and ostriches wandered its shores. As the area dried up, inhabitants migrated east to become the earliest settlers of the Nile Valley. In Pharaonic times, Dakhla retained several settlements and was a fertile land producing wine, fruit and grains. The Romans, and later Christians, left their mark by building over older settlements, and today's remaining medieval-era fortified towns attest to the more violent times of Bedouin and Arab raids.

Mut

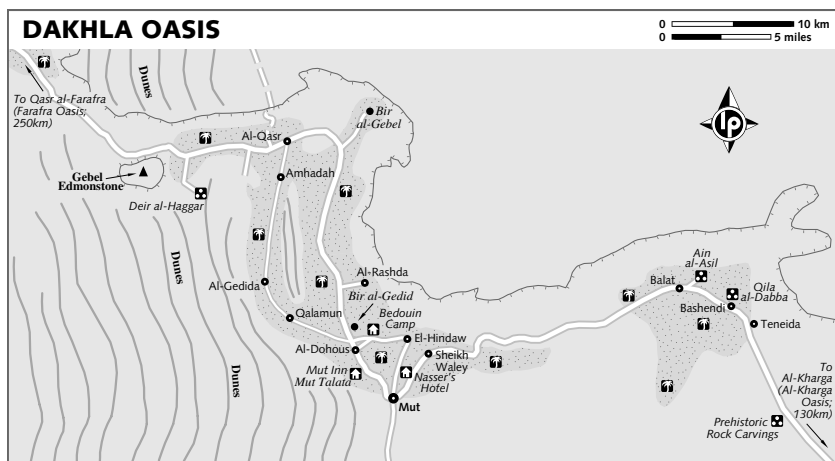
At the centre of the oasis lies the town of Mut, settled since Pharaonic times (Mut was the god Amun's consort). Although now a modern Egyptian town, it has the most facilities in the area and makes the most convenient base for travellers. Mut's wide boulevards and the proximity of the palm groves all help to give it some charm, while the remains of the ruined old town show how it must have once looked.

INFORMATION

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 123)

Tourist police (off Map p338; ☎ 782 1687; Sharia 10th of Ramadan)



Internet Access

Internet connections in Mut have been known to approach courier-pigeon speed. Abu Mohamed Restaurant (p339) and El-Forsan and Mebarez Hotels (see p338) all have an internet terminal or two, though prices are much higher (££10 to ££15) than at the internet cafés.

Abo Ali Internet (Map p338; Sharia as-Sawra al-Khadra; per hr ££1; ☎ 8am-late)

Mido Net (Map p338; Sharia Basateen; per hr ££1; ☎ 8am-late)

Medical Services

General hospital (Map p338; ☎ 782 1555; off Sharia 10th of Ramadan)

Money

Banque Misr (Map p338; Sharia al-Wadi; ☎ 8.30am-2pm Sun-Thu) Exchanges cash and does cash advances on Visa and MasterCard, but does not change travellers cheques.

Post & Telephone

Branch post office (Map p338; Sharia as-Salam; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu)

Main post office (Map p338; Midan al-Gamaa; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu)

Telephone centrale (Map p338; Sharia as-Salam; ☎ 24hr)

Tourist Information

Tourist office (Map p338; ☎ 782 1685 6; Sharia as-Sawra al-Khadra; ☎ 8am-3pm & some evenings) Friendly tourist-office director Omar Ahmad is a mine of knowledge

about the oases. For urgent issues he can be contacted at home on ☎ 782 0782.

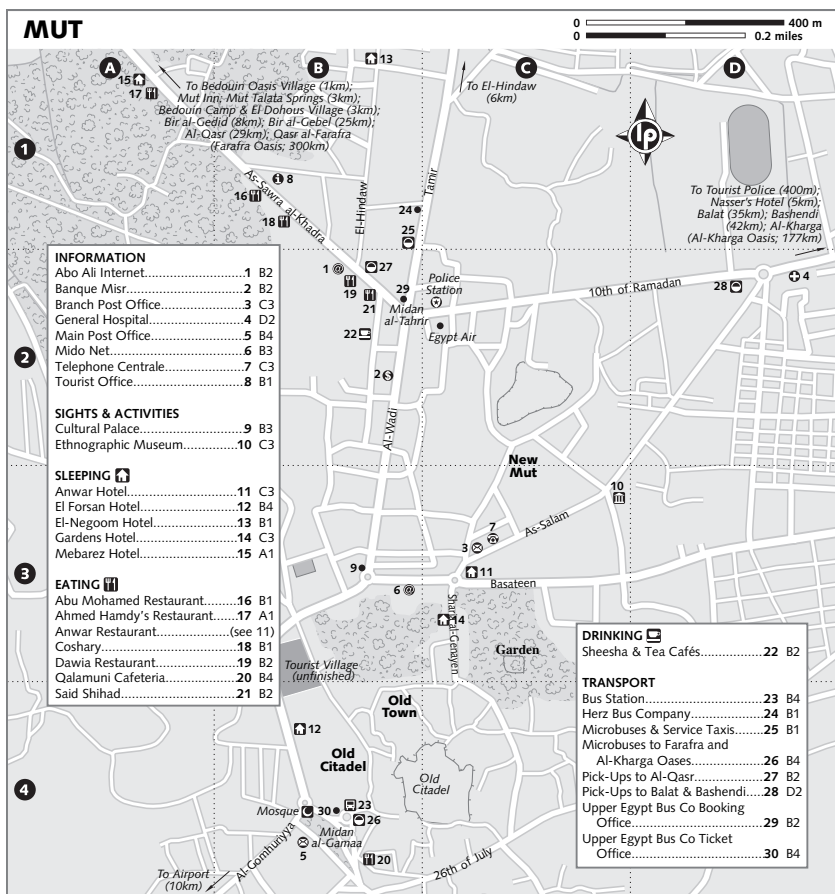
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Ethnographic Museum

Dakhla's wonderful **museum** (Map p338; Sharia as-Salam; admission ££3; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu), attached to Dar al-Wafdeen Government Hotel, is only opened on request: ask at the tourist office or at the **Cultural Palace** (Map p338; ☎ 782 1311; Sharia al-Wadi), where the museum's manager, Ibrahim Kamel, can be found. The museum is laid out as a traditional home, with different areas for men, women and visitors. Displays of clothing, baskets, jewellery and other domestic items give an insight into oasis life.

Old Town of Mut

For much of its existence, the villagers of old Mut lived with the threat of raiding Bedouin. Most houses here have no outside windows, thus protecting against intruders and keeping out the heat and wind of the desert. Often ignored by passing travellers, the labyrinth of mud-brick houses and lanes that wind up the slopes of the hill is definitely worth exploring. Today, you'll still see a few outlying houses being inhabited or used to store livestock, and there are plenty of low-slung, shaded corridors through which to meander. From the top of the hill, at the **citadel** (the original town centre; Map p338), there are great views of the new town and the desert cliffs and dunes that surround it.



TOURS

Dakhla has its share of keen, would-be desert guides (although they are not as aggressive as in Bahariya). Most hotels and restaurants will also offer to take you on a trek around the area. A typical day trip includes visits to Qalamuni (p342) and Baris al-Gedida (p336), a drive through the dunes, visits to a spring and a tour of Al-Qasr (p342), for up to E£100 per person. Alternatively, aspiring taxi drivers can drive you to outlying sights for around E£150 to E£200 per day.

An overnight trip around the same area, with Bedouin music, will cost about E£400 per person, including food. The owners of the Bedouin Camp (right) are camel experts and can arrange long and short trips into

the desert around Dakhla. You're looking at about E£60 for a two-hour ride or E£150 to E£200 per person per (bumpy) day. If you want to go further afield, check with the tourist office to confirm whether the person taking you has the necessary permits – Dakhla is one of the closest oases to the Gilf Kebir, but permits to go there are only issued from Cairo. For more information about desert safaris, see p329.

SLEEPING

Hotels

Mut has a decent selection of hotels, although most crowd the budget end of the spectrum. Recently, there's been a refreshing trend for hotels designed with Bedouin-influenced

flair, using natural materials, mud bricks and palm logs.

El-Forsan Hotel (Map p338; ☎ 782 1343; zakelmasy@yahoo.com; Sharia al-Wadi; s/d without bathroom ££16.50/25, s/d ££25/45, s/d bungalow ££35/60; 🍷) While the main building is a typically stuffy concrete confabulation, the newer, domed mud-brick bungalows out back are a much more interesting option. With attached rooms surrounding a small, lush garden, there's also a covered rotunda restaurant (meals ££15 to ££20) boasting top views. The friendly staff is keen to arrange local tours, and breakfast is available (££5 to ££8).

Gardens Hotel (Map p338; ☎ 782 1577; Sharia al-Genayen; s/d ££19/24, with shower ££18/23) Low prices and a good location help keep the rooms occupied at this ramshackle but popular budget hotel. There's a great bamboo café on the roof here, though the shared bathrooms can be pretty dire and single women may feel uncomfortable with the stares from resident Egyptian men. Breakfast is extra and the hotel rents bicycles for ££10 per hour.

Bedouin Camp & El-Dohous Village (Map p337; ☎ 785 0480; www.dakhlabedouins.com; Al-Dohous; huts s/d ££30/50, village s/d ££80/120) Al-Hag Abdel Hameed comes from a family of Bedouins who settled in the area a generation ago. While some of the original reed huts remain in Bedouin Camp, nearby El-Dohous Village has grown into a Disneyland of structures made from gently curving mud-brick and natural materials. There's a huge variety of rooms, from bell-shaped cave rooms to regular two-storey abodes, all carefully decorated with crafted pillows and local crafts. The hilltop restaurant has outstanding views (meals ££25) and there are plenty of cushioned chill-out areas strewn about the place. The nearby spring looks tempting but may stain clothes.

Anwar Hotel (Map p338; ☎ 782 0070; Sharia Basateen; s/d/tr with fan ££20/40/60, with air-con ££30/60/80; 🍷 🍷) The friendly and sociable Mr Anwar runs this family establishment with gusto and offers relatively clean rooms above the popular restaurant of the same name. Noise from the nearby mosque can be an issue.

Nasser's Hotel (Map p337; ☎ 782 2727, 010 682 6467; Sheikh Waley; s/d ££30/50; 🍷) While his brothers Abu Mohamed and Ahmed Hamdy run two of Dakhla's better restaurants, Nasser has given the hotel business a shot. His hotel has grown into a warren of gritty rooms with shared bathrooms, and although brand-new rooms were being built when we last visited, we're

sure a state of disrepair is their inevitable fate. A murky-looking pool has been added to the terrace.

El-Negoom Hotel (Map p338; ☎ 782 0014; fax 782 3084; north of Sharia as-Sawra al-Khadra; s/d ££40/50, with air-con ££45/75; 🍷) On a quiet street behind the tourist office and near a selection of restaurants, this extra-friendly hotel has a span of trim little abodes with bathrooms, some even with air-con and TV. This is one of the most dependable options in town.

Mut Inn (Map p337; ☎ 792 7982/6; www.solymar.com; Mut Talata Springs; s/d half board €45/70; 🍷 🍷) This three-star inn out of town at Mut Talata Springs sports six chalets, six lodge rooms with fans, a five-room villa and a restaurant. The décor is kitsch and the rooms overpriced, but this is a comfortable hotel with a pleasant, deep pool fed by warm spring water.

Mebarez Hotel (Map p338; ☎ /fax 782 1524; Sharia as-Sawra al-Khadra; s/d ££65/105, with air-con ££95/115; 🍷 🍷) Safari groups and others doing an oases tour like to stay here, where the rooms offer a reasonable level of comfort and cleanliness, even though the staff can be surly. The top-floor rooms have great vistas over the oasis – ask for one facing away from the road.

Bedouin Oasis Village (off Map p338; ☎ 782 0070, 012 669 4893; s/d ££70/150, full board ££100/200) This relative newcomer, on a rise above the main street into town, has well-designed, traditional-style buildings replete with a deluge of domes, arches and vaults. Nice arty touches in the humble-but-cosy rooms and in the communal areas really spruce the place up, and the restaurant (dinner around ££20) has splendid views. In the oases' race to 'Beduinify' everything (it's the flavour of the month), these guys have trumped the competition with the first 'Bedouin spa' (ie a natural spring pool).

Camping

You should be able to camp near the dunes west of Mut or in Al-Qasr, on a star-lit plateau just north of town, but check first with the tourist office in Mut.

EATING & DRINKING

There is no fancy dining in Mut, but there is some decent, fresh food (mostly of the chicken/kebab/rice variety) to be had. For an atmospheric tea or *sheesha* (water pipe), pop into one of the rowdy and popular outdoor *sheesha* and tea cafés near Midan al-Tahrir.

Anwar Restaurant (Map p338; ☎ 782 0070; Sharia Basateen; meals E£2-15) A café-restaurant that's popular with locals, below the hotel of the same name. Anwar serves up *ta'amiyya* and *fuul*, in addition to the more substantial chicken-and-rice combo.

Ahmed Hamdy's Restaurant (Map p338; ☎ 782 0767; Sharia as-Sawra al-Khadra; meals E£2-15) On the main road into town is Ahmed Hamdy's popular place serving delicious chicken, kebabs, vegetables and a few other small dishes inside or on the terrace. The freshly squeezed lime juice is excellent and you can request beer (E£12) and *sheesha*.

Abu Mohamed Restaurant (Map p338; ☎ 782 1431; Sharia as-Sawra al-Khadra; meals E£3-25; 🍷) Abu Mohamed, brother of Ahmed Hamdy, touts, cooks and serves in this simple roadside restaurant. His set meal includes good vegetables with kebab or pigeon (order ahead) and ends with homemade *basbousa* (a sticky dessert). Cold beer, internet and bike hire are available.

Dawia Restaurant (Map p338; Sharia as-Sawra al-Khadra; meals E£5-12) The wall-to-wall, sparkling white tiles signal one of the cleanest places to eat in town. As well as the usual Egyptian victuals, Dawia throws caution to the wind: it fries up burgers and even experiments with several pasta dishes.

Said Shihad (Map p338; Sharia as-Sawra al-Khadra; meals E£6-15) Owner Said is onto a good thing here: grilling up a meat-centric feast nightly to a dedicated following of hungry locals. The lamb shish kebab is the thing to go for – yum!

If you need to scratch a *ta'amiyya* or *fuul* itch, the following will oblige:

Coshary (Map p338; Sharia as-Sawra al-Khadra; meals E£2)

Qalamuni Cafeteria (Map p338; Midan al-Gamaa; dishes E£2-10)

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Bus

Upper Egypt Bus Co (Map p338; ☎ 782 4366; Midan al-Gamaa) runs buses at 7pm and 8.30pm to Cairo (E£56, eight to 10 hours) via Al-Kharga Oasis (E£10, one to two hours) and Asyut (E£20, four to five hours). Other services to Asyut leave at 6am, 8.30am and 10pm. You can also go to Cairo (E£56) via Farafra Oasis (E£20, three to four hours) and Bahariya Oasis (E£35, seven hours) at 6am and 7pm. There's a convenient **booking office** (Map p338; Midan al-Fahrir), where the bus also stops to pick up passengers.

Herz Bus Company (Map p338; ☎ 782 4914) recently started running a daily bus to Cairo (through Asyut) at 8pm (E£45) from the microbus and service taxi station.

Service Taxi & Microbus

Microbuses leave when full from the old part of Mut, near the mosque, and cost E£10 to Al-Kharga, E£20 to either Farafra or Asyut and around E£60 to Cairo.

GETTING AROUND

Abu Mohamed Restaurant (p339) and Gardens Hotel (p338) rent out bicycles for E£10 per hour.

Most places in Dakhla are linked by crowded pick-ups, Peugeot or microbuses, but working out where they all go requires a degree in astrophysics. Those heading to Al-Qasr (E£1) depart from Sharia as-Sawra al-Khadra. You can take pick-ups to Balat and Bashendi from in front of the hospital for E£1. Most others depart from the service taxi station on Sharia Tamir.

It may prove easier on occasion to bargain for a 'special' pick-up.

Around Mut

The following sights are all marked on the Dakhla Oasis map (p337).

HOT SPRINGS

There are several hot sulphur pools around the town of Mut, but the easiest to reach is **Mut Talata** (Mut Three). It's at the site of a small hotel (p338), so unless you are staying there, you have to dip in the exposed 1.5m-deep pool outside the hotel's walls. The pool's funny-coloured water is both hot and actually relaxing, though it may stain clothes.

Bir al-Gedid (New Spring), a short distance from the Bedouin Camp (p338), is the latest artesian well to be dug and is also rust-coloured.

Set among breathtaking desert scenery, **Bir al-Gebel** (Mountain Spring; admission E£10) has been turned into a day-trip destination where blaring music and hundreds of school children easily overwhelm any ambience it might have had. Sitting on the edge of a small palm-shrouded oasis, surrounded by rolling dunes and towering desert cliffs, this still has to be one of the most beautiful dipping-spots in the oases. It's best to come in the

THESE ARE A FEW OF OUR FAVOURITE SPRINGS...

There's nothing better after a hard day's rambling along the dusty roads of the desert than a soak or swim in one of the many springs that dot the Western Desert. The following are but a few of our best-loved water holes:

Cleopatra's Bath (p360) No, the queen in question probably did not bathe here, but since this is one of the most famous, stunning and clear bubbling springs in the Western Deserts, it's fine by us.

Bir Wahed (p360) This hot, Jacuzzi-like spring sits among the dunes on the edge of the Great Sand Sea. Amazing sunsets guaranteed.

Ain Gomma (p354) A small, gushing, clear and cool isolated spring in a minioasis 45km south of Bawiti, surrounded on all sides by the vast desert expanse.

Bir al-Gebel (opposite) Surrounded by breathtaking scenery, this spring can get packed with rowdy picnickers during the day. It's ideal in the evening when the crowds die down.

Spring Etiquette

When bathing in the public springs of the oases, it's important to be mindful of generally accepted spring etiquette:

- If locals are bathing, wait until they are finished before entering the water.
- During the day, women should wear a long baggy T-shirt over their bathing suit, although in some places even this may not be appropriate.
- To locals, a woman bathing alone is about as provocative as running through a town's main drag in your panties. Don't do it.

evening when it's quieter and the stars blaze across the night sky. If you arrive during spring peak hour, there's a serene natural spring about 500m before Bir al-Gebel on the right, concealed behind a brick pump house. A sign marks the turn-off 20km north of Mut, from where it's about another 5km to the springs.

SAND DUNES & CAMEL RIDES

A few kilometres out past the southern end of town you can have a roll around in sand dunes which, while not the most spectacular in the desert, are easy to reach for people without their own transport. Almost every hotel and restaurant in Mut offers day trips that include a sand dune stop. Sunset camel rides out to the dunes can also be arranged (see Tours, p338).

ROCK CARVINGS

Dakhla's cultivated land ends at the feet of some strange rock formations 45km towards Al-Kharga. This was the crossroads of two important caravan routes, the Darb al-Ghabari between Dakhla and Al-Kharga and another, now lost, track that linked the nearby village of Teneida with the Darb al-Arba'een to the south. Carved into the soft rock are prehistoric rock carvings, showing

camels, giraffes and tribal markings. Long visited by desert travellers, some of whom left their names carved in the rock, it has recently suffered from the attentions of less scrupulous travellers who have all but ruined most of these curious images with their own graffiti.

BALAT

For a captivating glance into life during medieval times, pay a visit to the Islamic village of Balat, 35km east of Mut. Built during the era of the Mamaluks and Turks on a site that dates back to the Old Kingdom, this is a living monument to the possibilities of Sudanic-style mud architecture. Here in the old town, charismatic, winding lanes weave through low-slung corridors past Gaudi-like moulded benches. Palm fronds are still used for shelter as smoothly rounded walls ease into each other. The tiny doors here were designed to keep houses cool and confuse potential invaders. A guide will happily take you onto the roof of one of the three-storey mud-brick houses for commanding views (a small tip is expected). To get to Balat, a pick-up from near the general hospital in Mut will cost ££1.

You will need your own vehicle to explore **Ain al-Asil**, or the Spring of the Origin, an

Old Kingdom settlement. The oasis expert Ahmed Fakry, who excavated here in the 1970s and found remains of a large fortress and possibly a canal, believed it was once the capital of the oasis. The site was abandoned in Ptolemaic times and there is little of interest here today unless you are archeologically inclined. Ain al-Asil is about 2km down a track leading north off the main road, 200m east of Balat.

About 1.5km past Ain al-Asil is **Qila al-Dabba** (adult/student ££20/10), Balat's ancient necropolis. The five mastabas (mud-brick structures above tombs that were the basis for later pyramids) here, the largest of which stands over 10m high, date back to the 6th dynasty. Four are ruined, but one has been restored and is now open to the public. Originally all five would have been clad in fine limestone, with three thought to have belonged to important Old Kingdom governors of the oasis. Opening hours are 8pm to 5pm October to April and 8am to 6pm May to September, but you may need to find a guardian in the nearby buildings.

BASHENDI

This small village to the north of the main Dakhla–Al-Kharga road takes its name from Pasha Hindi, the medieval sheikh buried nearby. The **Tomb of Pasha Hindi** is covered by an Islamic-era dome, which sits over a Roman structure, clearly visible from the inside of the building. Locals make pilgrimages to pray for the saint's intercession. Nearby is the sandstone **Tomb of Kitines** (both tombs adult/student ££20/10; ☞ 8am–5pm Oct–Apr, 8am–6pm May–Sep), which was occupied by Senussi soldiers during WWI and by a village family after that. Nevertheless, some funerary reliefs have survived and show the 2nd-century AD notable meeting the gods Min, Seth and Shu.

AL-QASR

One of the must-see sights in Dakhla Oasis is the extraordinary medieval/Ottoman town of Al-Qasr, which lies on the edge of lush vegetation at the foot of the pink limestone cliffs that mark the northern edge of the oasis. It's an extraordinary place that has been thoughtfully restored to provide a glimpse of how other oasis towns looked before the New Valley development projects had their way with them. Several hundred people still live in the town that not so long ago was home to several thousand.

Sights

The Supreme Council for Antiquities has taken responsibility for the town, but because people still live there, it is unable to enclose the site or charge an entrance fee. Visitors are expected to go with one of the Antiquities guards (who will expect a 'donation' of up to ££10).

The old town is built on the ancient foundations of a Roman city and is thought to be the one of the oldest inhabited areas of the oases. The gateway of a temple to Thoth is now the front of a private house, and inscribed blocks from the temple have been used in other local buildings. Most of what you can see today, however, dates to the Ottoman period (1516–1798). During its heyday, this was probably the capital of the oasis, easily protected by barring the fort's quartered streets. The size of the houses and the surviving fragments of decoration suggest a puzzling level of wealth and importance given to this town by the Ottomans.

The architecture of the narrow covered streets harks back to its ancient origins. The winding lanes manage to remain cool in the scalding summer and also serve to protect their inhabitants from desert sandstorms. Entrances to old houses can be clearly seen and some are marked by beautiful lintels – acacia beams situated above the door. Carved with the names of the carpenter and the owner of the house, the date and a verse from the Quran, these decorative touches are wonderfully preserved.

There are 37 lintels in the village, the earliest of which dates to the early 16th century. One of the finest is above the **Tomb of Sheikh Nasr ad-Din** inside the old mosque, which is marked by a restored 12th-century mud-brick minaret. Adjoining it is **Nasr ad-Din Mosque**, with a 21m-high minaret. Several buildings have been renovated, including one that appears to have been a **madrassa**, a school where Islamic law was taught and which doubled as a town hall and courthouse: prisoners were tied to a stake near the entrance.

Also of interest is the restored **House of Abu Nafir**. A dramatic pointed arch at the entrance frames a huge studded wooden door. Built of mud brick, and on a grander scale than the surrounding houses, it incorporates huge blocks from an earlier structure, possibly a Ptolemaic temple, decorated with hieroglyphic reliefs.

Other features of the town include the **pottery factory**, a **blacksmith's forge**, a **water-wheel**, an **olive press** and a huge old **corn mill** that has been fully restored to function with Flintstonelike efficiency when its shaft is rotated. Near the entrance is the **Ethnographic Museum** (admission £E3; ☎ 9am-sunset). Occupying Sherif Ahmed's house, which itself dates back to 1785, the museum's everyday objects try to give life to the empty buildings around them.

Heading back to Mut from Al-Qasr, take the secondary road for a change of scenery. You can visit several **tombs** (admission £E10) near the ruined village of Amhadah, dating from the 2nd century. About 15km further towards Mut is the Mamluk village of **Qalamun**, with both Ottoman and modern houses built of mud. There are good views of the countryside from the cemetery.

Sleeping

Al-Qasr Hotel (☎ 787 6013; s/d/tr £E10/20/30) The sprightly and ever-helpful Mohamed captains this great little guesthouse, which sits above a café near the old town. The bucolically charming rooms have screens and balconies and some even boast views onto Al-Qasr. There's a breezy upstairs communal sitting area where you can play games or relax, and for £E2 you can sleep on a mattress on the roof. The ground-floor coffee-house and restaurant serves good basic fare (breakfast £E3 extra). Mohamed rents bikes for £E5 a day and arranges camel tours into the surrounding desert (£E75 for the day, £E120 overnight).

Beir Elgabal Camp (☎ 772 6600; elgabalcamp@hotmail.com; s/d £E25/50; 🏠) This place has clean, plain rooms next to Bir al-Gebel spring. It's in an idyllic position at the base of the soaring desert mountains, although fairly isolated from any amenities, 4km from the turn-off on the Mut road.

Desert Lodge (☎ 772 7061/2, in Cairo 02-690 5240; www.desertlodge.net; s/d/tr half board US\$90/120/150; 🍷 🍷) The best accommodation in Dakhla also has the best views of Al-Qasr. This thoughtfully designed, mud-brick fortress of a lodge crowns a hilltop overlooking the town and comprises 32 large rooms in traditionally styled clusters. The restaurant is adequate, and there is also a bar and many of the services you would expect for the exacting price.

Getting There & Away

Pick-ups to Al-Qasr leave from opposite Said Shihad restaurant in Mut and cost £E1.

DEIR AL-HAGGAR

This restored Roman **sandstone temple** (admission £E20; ☎ 8am-sunset) is one of the most complete Roman monuments in Dakhla. Dedicated to the Theban triad of Amun, Mut and Khons, as well as Horus (who can be seen with a falcon's head), it was built between the reigns of Nero (AD 54–68) and Domitian (AD 81–96). The cartouches of Nero, Vespasian and Titus can be seen in the hypostyle hall, which has also been inscribed by almost every 19th-century explorer who passed through the oasis. If you look carefully in the adjacent Porch of Titus you can see the names of the entire expedition of Gerhard Rohlfs, the 19th-century desert explorer. Also visible are the names of famous desert travellers Edmonstone, Drovetti and Houghton.

The temple has been enclosed by a wall to help prevent wind and sand erosion. Deir al-Haggar is signposted about 7km west of Al-Qasr; from the turn-off it's another 5km to the temple.

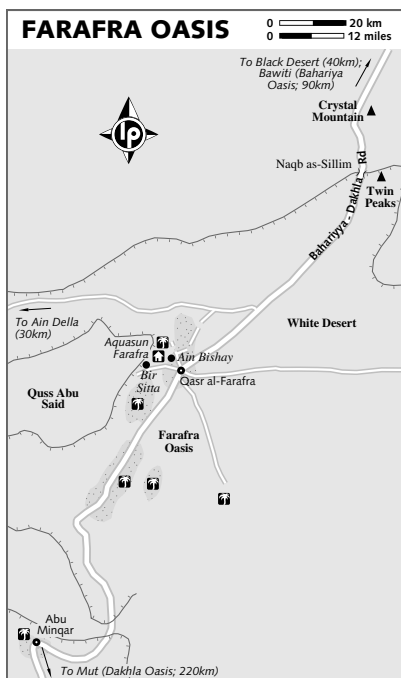
FARAFRA OASIS

☎ 092 / pop 21,920

Blink and you might miss dusty Farafra, the least populated and most remote of the Western Desert's oases. Though little evidence has been found of Pharaonic occupation, Farafra does make a cameo appearance in the legend of King Cambyses' army (see boxed text, p346), which is purported to have disappeared in the 6th century BC on its way to Siwa.

Farafra's exposed location made it prone to frequent attacks by Libyans and Bedouin tribes, many of whom eventually settled in the oasis and now make up much of the population.

In recent years, the government has been increasing its efforts to revitalise this region, and the agriculture of olives, dates, apricots, guava, figs, oranges, apples and sunflowers is slowly developing. Though light on tourist infrastructure or any real attractions, Farafra's proximity to the White Desert (only 20km away) and its torpid pace of life and extensive palm gardens, manage to draw a small trickle of travellers each year.



Qasr al-Farafra

The only real town in Farafra Oasis, Qasr al-Farafra remains an undeveloped speck on the western Egypt circuit that is only now beginning to discover the cheap thrills of concrete. The town's tumbledown Roman fortress was originally built to guard this part of the desert caravan route, though these days all it has to show for it is a mound of rubble.

Some small, mud-brick houses still stand here against all the odds, their doorways secured with medieval peg locks and their walls painted with verses of the Quran.

INFORMATION

For tourist information, contact the tourist office in Mut (p337).

Hospital (Map p345; ☎ 751 0047; main Bahariya-Dakhla rd) For dire emergencies only.

Post office (Map p345; off main Bahariya-Dakhla rd; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm)

Telephone centrale (Map p345; off main Bahariya-Dakhla rd; ☎ 24hr)

Tourist police (Map p345; Sharia al-Mishtafa Nak haz) No telephone.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Badr's Museum

Badr Abdel Moghny is a self-taught artist whose gift to his town has become its only real sight, bless 'im. **Badr's Museum** (Map p345; ☎ 751 0091, 012 170 4710; donation E£5; ☎ 8.30am-sunset), surrounded by a desert garden, is worth seeing for the enthusiasm that Badr puts into his work, much of which records traditional oasis life. His distinctive style of painting and sculpture in mud, stone and sand has won him foreign admirers; he exhibited successfully in Europe in the early 1990s and later in Cairo.

Springs

A popular stop is **Bir Sitta** (Well No Six; Map p344), a sulphurous hot spring 6km northwest of Qasr al-Farafra. Water gushes into a Jacuzzi-sized concrete pool and then spills out into a larger tank. This is a good place for a night-time soak under the stars.

The Roman spring of **Ain Bishay** (Map p344) bubbles forth from a hillock on the northwest edge of town. It has been developed into an irrigated grove of date palms together with citrus, olive, apricot and carob trees, and is a cool haven amid the arid landscape. Several families tend the crops here; you should seek someone out and ask permission before wandering around.

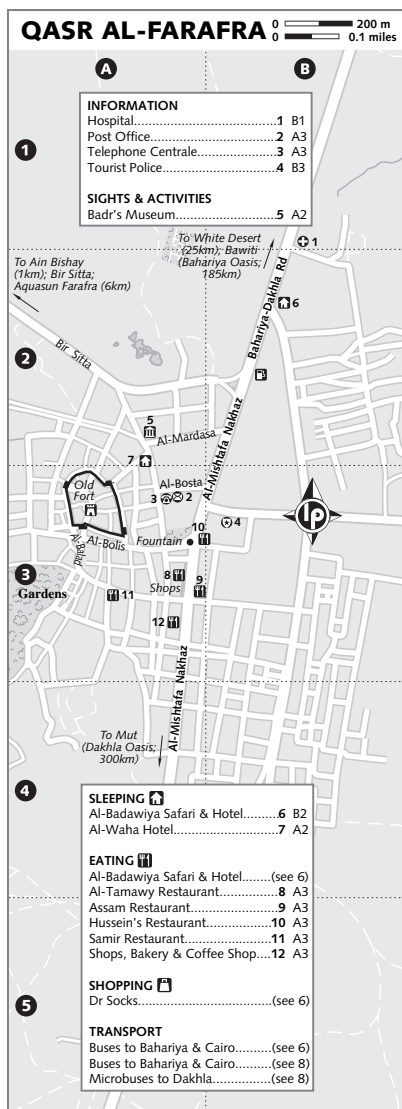
TOURS

Farafra is nearer than Bahariya to the White Desert and yet there is a very limited choice of desert outfits. Al-Waha Hotel (below) offers perfunctory trips around Farafra and the White Desert for around E£425 per vehicle for an overnight stay. Both Al-Badawiya and Aquasun are more expensive (see Sleeping, below), but are well prepared for long-range desert travel as well as trips closer to home; see also p329.

SLEEPING

At the time of our visit, the new Sahara Hotel was being completed 1km north of town, promising to bring more dome-roofed, mud-brick goodness to Farafra.

Al-Waha Hotel (Map p345; ☎ 016 209 3224, 012 720 0387; wahaforafra@yahoo.com; d without bathroom E£35, s & d E£45) A small, primitive hotel opposite Badr's Museum, Al-Waha offers two- and three-bed rooms with orderly shared bathrooms, though frills are at a premium here.



Some rooms have balconies onto the unsealed streets of Farafra.

Aqasun Farafra (Map p344; ☎ 012 7807 999; www.raid4x4egypt.com; Bir Sitta; s/d half board €50/70; 🚗 🚐) Built beside Bir Sitta and nestled in its own idyllic oasis, Aqasun has 21 chalet-style rooms built around a peaceful garden. Each has its own porch, thatched with palm fronds,

and piping-hot water from Bir Sitta fills the hotel pool. Owner Hisham Nessim has had years of hotel-owning experience in Sinai and is also a longtime desert-safari operator (see also p329).

Al-Badawiya Safari & Hotel (Map p345; ☎ 751 0060, 012 214 8343; www.badawiya.com; s/d E£140/200, villas with air-con E£220/300; 🚗 🚐 🚚) We hear mixed opinions about Al-Badawiya on the Bahariya–Dakhla road, but there is no escaping the dynamism of the Ali brothers, who dominate Farafra tourism with their hotel and safari outfit. Al-Badawiya has a wide choice of stylishly designed and traditionally themed rooms and is dotted with cushioned sitting areas, has a refreshing pool, and boasts more than its fair share of arches and domes. Breakfast costs E£20, reservations are recommended in winter. Saad Ali and Hamdy Ali lead camel and jeep trips into the Western Desert (see p329).

EATING

As with most facilities, eating choices are limited in Farafra.

Al-Tamawy Restaurant (Map p345; dishes E£2-10) A cafeteria on the main road, Al-Tamawy has uncomplicated food on offer along with tea, coffee and, of course, *sheesha*.

Samir Restaurant (Map p345; dishes E£8-20) With outdoor tables off the main drag, this tourist-oriented place is spotless, with, wait for it, tablecloths! The spicy kebabs are delicious, though it's a shame it tends to hike the prices. Check the prices before you dine.

Aqasun Farafra (Map p344; ☎ 012 225 9660; meals E£20-45) Fresh organic ingredients are used in Aqasun's restaurant, and dishes are a choice of the usual Western and Egyptian staples. Has been known to serve beer and wine.

Al-Badawiya Safari & Hotel (Map p345; ☎ 751 0060, 012 214 8343; meals E£25-50) Al-Badawiya serves freshly made, if rather expensive, dishes including pasta and simple three-course meals, using organic vegetables from its own farm. Serves beer and wine on occasion.

You can also try **Hussein's Restaurant** (Map p345; dishes E£5-9) or **Assam Restaurant** (Map p345; dishes E£6-15) for simple outdoor seating and grilled meats to order.

SHOPPING

It's a family affair. In the summer, Dr Socks takes wool from the neck and lower back of camels, spins it and knits. His sister makes

THE LOST ARMY OF CAMBYSES

Persian king Cambyses invaded Egypt in 525 BC, overthrowing Egyptian pharaoh Psamtek III and signalling the beginning of Persian rule over the country that was to last 193 years. This success, however, was not necessarily representative of this 'tyrannical despot's' skills as a military strategist. In the years immediately following his conquest of Egypt, Cambyses mounted several disastrous offensives. In one such campaign, he sent a mercenary army down the Nile into Ethiopia that was so ill-prepared and undersupplied it had to turn to cannibalism to survive. The soldiers returned disgraced, having never even encountered the enemy on the battlefield.

Cambyses' most famous failure, however, remains his attempt to capture the Oracle of Amun in Siwa (see p359). As recounted by Greek writer Herodotus, Cambyses set out to destroy the famous oracle, which insolently predicted his tragic end, and legitimise his rule over Egypt. To this end, he dispatched an army of 50,000 men from Thebes, supported by a vast train of pack animals weighed down by supplies and weapons. The army is purported to have reached Al-Kharga and Farafra Oases before turning west to cover the 325km of open desert to Siwa – a 30-day march without any shade or sources of water. Legend has it that after struggling through the Great Sand Sea, the men were engulfed by a fierce sandstorm, which buried the entire army under the desert's shifting sands never to be heard from again.

There have been dozens of unsuccessful expeditions over the centuries determined to find a trace of the lost men of Cambyses. Only time will tell if the shifting sands that buried this ancient army will ever reveal their archaeological riches.

sweaters, his uncle blankets, while he and his mother get on with the socks and scarves. Dr Socks and his wares can be found at Al-Badawiya Safari & Hotel (p344) and beyond. Count on ££10 to ££30 for socks, and up to ££400 for a blanket.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are buses from Farafra to Cairo (££40, eight to 10 hours) via Bahariya (££20, two to three hours) at 10am and 10pm. Buses from Farafra to Dakhla (££20, four to five hours) originate in Cairo and leave around 1pm to 2pm and around 1am to 2am. Buses stop at Al-Tamawy Restaurant, the petrol station and at Al-Badawiya hotel. Tickets are bought from the conductor.

Microbuses to Dakhla (££20, three to four hours) also leave from in front of Al-Tamawy Restaurant when full (ie not often), so you're better off going early in the morning. The same goes for microbuses to Bahariya Oasis (££20, three hours). Rare service taxis to Dakhla cost ££20, to Al-Kharga ££30.

FARAFRA TO BAHARIYA OASIS

The stupefying desert formations between the Farafra and Bahariya Oases are responsible for attracting more travellers to this far-flung corner of Egypt than any other sight. No surprises there: this unearthly terrain varies from the bizarre and impossibly

shaped rock formations of the White Desert to the eerie black-coned mountains of the nearby Black Desert, with a healthy dose of sand dunes interspersed for good measure. These regions are relatively easy to get to from either Farafra or Bahariya Oases and are immensely popular with one-day and overnight safari tours.

Ain Della

Surrounded by cliffs on the north and east and dunes to the south and west, Ain Della (Spring of the Shade) lies about 120km from Farafra al-Qasr. The contrasting tawny hues of the surrounding landscape envelop this area in an alluring, almost soft glow. But Ain Della is more than a picturesque water hole. Lying within 200km of the three major oases of Siwa, Bahariya and Farafra, it has been a strategic and extremely important source of water for desert travellers since ancient times. Most famously, the army of the Persian conqueror Cambyses is thought by many to have disappeared in the dunes near here (see boxed text, p359). During WWII the British Army's Long Range Desert Group stored fuel and supplies here and used it as a jumping-off place for their raids behind German and Italian lines.

Ain Della's position is still considered vital to controlling vast swathes of the Western Desert: it is from here that Egyptian army patrols search the desert for drugs and arms

smugglers. Anyone coming here must have a guide and military permit (obtained through desert guides; see also boxed text, p352, or Tours, p361 and p344).

White Desert

Upon first glimpse of the White Desert (Sahra al-Beida; Map p344) dreamscape, you'll feel like a modern Alice fallen through the desert looking-glass. Starting just 20km northeast of Farafra, the yellow desert sands east of the road start to become pierced by chalky rock formations, sprouting almost supernaturally from the ground. Blinding-white spires of rock reach for the sky, each frost-coloured lollipop licked into an ever odder shape by the dry desert winds. As you get further into the 300-sq-km White Desert Protectorate, you'll notice that the surreal shapes start to take on familiar forms; chickens, ostriches, camels, hawks and other uncanny shapes abound. They are best viewed at sunrise or sunset, when the sun turns them hues of pink and orange, Salvador Dali-like, or under a full moon which gives the landscape a ghostly, arctic, whipped-cream appearance. The sand around the outcroppings is littered with quartz and different varieties of deep-black iron pyrites, as well as small fossils.

On the west side of the road, away from the wind-eroded shapes, there are small canyons formed by white, clifflike chalk monoliths called inselbergs. Less dramatic than other areas, they are nevertheless beautiful, and eerie to walk around. The shade and privacy they provide also makes them good camping spots.

About 50km north are two flat-topped mountains known as the **Twin Peaks**, a key navigation point for travellers. A favourite destination of local tour operators, the view from the top of the surrounding symmetrical hills, all shaped like giant ant hills, is spectacular. Just beyond here, the road climbs a steep escarpment known as **Naqb as-Sillim** (Pass of the Stairs); this is the main pass that leads into and out of the Farafra depression and marks the end of the White Desert.

A few kilometres further along, the desert floor changes again and becomes littered with quartz crystals. If you look at the rock formations in this area you'll see that they are also largely made of crystal. The most famous of the formations is the **Crystal Mountain**, actually a large rock made entirely of quartz. It sits right beside the main road some 24km north of Naqb as-Sillim, and is easily recognisable by the large hole through its middle.

KNOW YOUR DUNE

Formal classification of types of sand dune was made in the 1970s, when scientists could examine photographs of dune fields taken on an early space mission. They identified five types of dune, four of which are found in Egypt.

Parallel Straight Dunes

Called *seif* (sword) in Arabic because they resemble the blades of curved Arab swords, these dunes are formed by wind and are primarily found in the Great Sand Sea and the northern Western Desert. Usually on the move, they will even fall down an escarpment, reforming at its base.

Parallel Wavy (or Barchan) Dunes

These are crescent-shaped dunes, with a slip face on one side. They are as wide as they are long and are usually found in straight lines with flat corridors between them. Usually on the move, they can travel as far as 19m in one year. They are predominant in Al-Kharga and Dakhla Oases and are also found in the Great Sand Sea.

Star Dunes

Created by wind blowing in different directions, these dunes are usually found alone. Instead of moving, they tend to build up within a circle. They are rare in Egypt.

Crescent (or Whaleback) Dunes

These are hill-like dunes formed when a series of smaller dunes collide and piggyback one another. Distinctive, with sides pointing in different directions, they can be seen in the area between Al-Kharga and Dakhla Oases.

Unfortunately, the White Desert is in danger of becoming a victim of its own popularity as more and more people choose to make the journey here. On busy nights, the horizon is filled with the lights of campfires, the still night filled with the sound of drums and singing. Daylight reveals burned-out campfires, discarded refuse and, most depressing of all, tyre tracks over the white rocks. The fragile white chalk formations are now threatened, and although the area has been designated a protectorate, there is not enough funding to pay for adequate protection. If you are going to visit – and we are not suggesting you don't – consider going by foot or camel, be sure to leave nothing behind and, if you are driving, discourage your guide from driving over the rocks.

For information on getting to the White Desert see right.

Black Desert

The change in the desert floor from beige to black, 50km south of Bawiti, signals the beginning of the Black Desert (Sahara Suda). No surprises there. Formed by the erosion of the mountains, which have spread a layer of black powder and rubble over the ground, the desert stands as a particularly stark contrast to the White Desert further south. Small, black, volcano-shaped mountains mark the end of the desert and are part of a fault that runs

through Bahariya Oasis. The Black Desert is a popular stop-off for tours running out of Bahariya, though it's mostly ill-suited for overnight camping. Other sights in the region include **Gebel Gala Siwa**, a pyramid-shaped mountain that was formerly a lookout post for caravans coming from Siwa. **Gebel az-Zuqaq** is a mountain known for the red, yellow and orange streaks in its limestone base. There is an easily climbed path leading to the top.

Getting There & Away

Ordinary vehicles are able to drive the first kilometre or so off the road into the White or Black Deserts, but only 4WD vehicles can advance deeper into either area. Some travellers simply get off the bus and take themselves into the White Desert – but be very sure that you have adequate supplies, and remember that traffic between the neighbouring oases is rarely heavy.

There are plenty of safari outfits that can take you around these sights. See boxed text, p352, and p344 for listings.

BAHARIYA OASIS

☎ 02 / pop 33,680

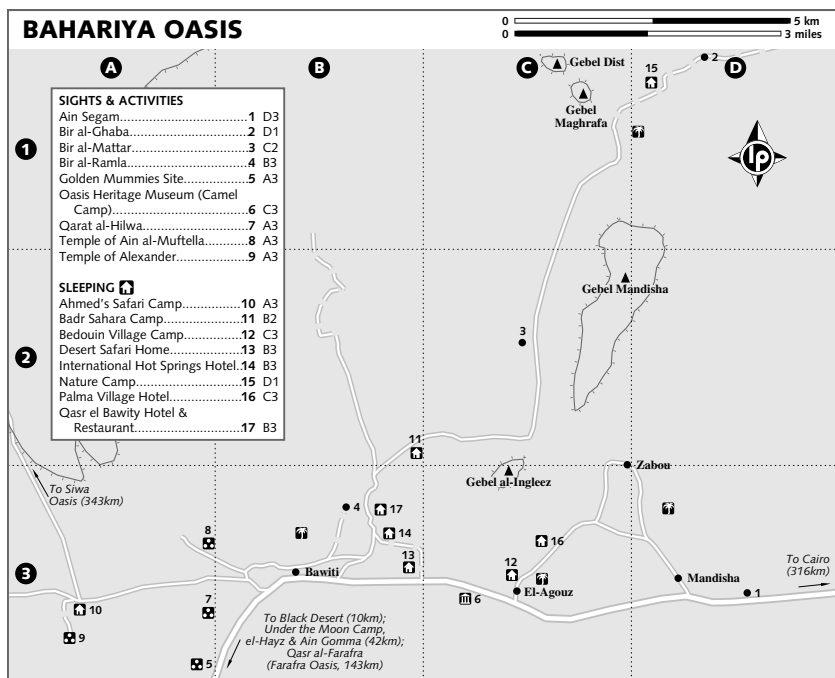
Bahariya is one of the more fetching of the desert circuit oases, and at just 365km from Cairo is also the most accessible. Surrounded on all sides by towering ridges, much of the oasis floor is covered by verdant plantations

BAHARIYA'S GOLDEN MUMMY CACHE

Put it down to the donkey: until 1996, no-one had any idea of the extent of Bahariya's archaeological treasure trove. Then a donkey stumbled on a hole near the temple of Alexander the Great and its rider saw the face of a golden mummy peering through the sand. Since then Dr Zahi Hawass, head of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, and his team have done extensive research in a cemetery that stretches over 3 sq km (see Map p349). Radar has revealed more than 10,000 mummies, and excavation has revealed more than 230 of them in what has come to be called the Valley of the Golden Mummies.

These silent witnesses of a bygone age could shed new light on life in this part of Egypt during the Graeco-Roman period, a 600-year interlude marking the transition between the Pharaonic and Christian eras. Bahariya was then a thriving oasis, and with its rich, fertile land watered by natural springs, was a famous producer of wheat and wine. Greek and, later, Roman families set up home here and became a kind of expatriate elite.

Research has shown that after a brief decline when Ptolemys and Romans fought for control of the oasis, Roman administrators embarked on a major public works programme, expanding irrigation systems, digging wells, restoring aqueducts and building roads. Thousands of mud-brick buildings sprang up throughout the oasis. Bahariya became a major source of grain for the empire and was home to a large garrison of troops; its wealth grew proportionately. Researchers are hoping that continued excavation of the necropolis will provide more answers about the region's early history and its inhabitants.



of date palms and pockmarked with dozens of refreshing springs.

The conical hills that lie strewn around the valley floor may have once formed islands in the lake that covered the area during prehistoric times. During the Pharaonic era, the oasis was a centre of agriculture, producing wine sold in the Nile Valley and as far away as Rome. Its strategic location on the Libyan–Nile Valley caravan routes ensured it prospered throughout later ages. In recent years, stunning archaeological finds, such as that of the Golden Mummies (see boxed text, opposite), and easy access to the White and Black Deserts have earned Bahariya a firm spot on the tourist map.

Bawiti

The sandy streets of the region's modern administrative capital may at first sight seem pretty underwhelming. But scratch beneath the surface and you might walk away with a different picture: stroll through its fertile palm groves, soak in one of the many hot springs or explore its quiet back roads, where donkeys still outnumber combustion engines.

Until recently, Bawiti was a quiet town dependent on agriculture, but it's gaining a new lease on life as more people head to the desert or come to see the Golden Mummies, and now has a good selection of hotels. Be warned, however, that upon arrival you're likely to be accosted by overzealous touts before you even step off the bus (see boxed text, p352).

INFORMATION

Hospital (Map p350; ☎ 3847 2390) Head to Cairo except in dire emergency.

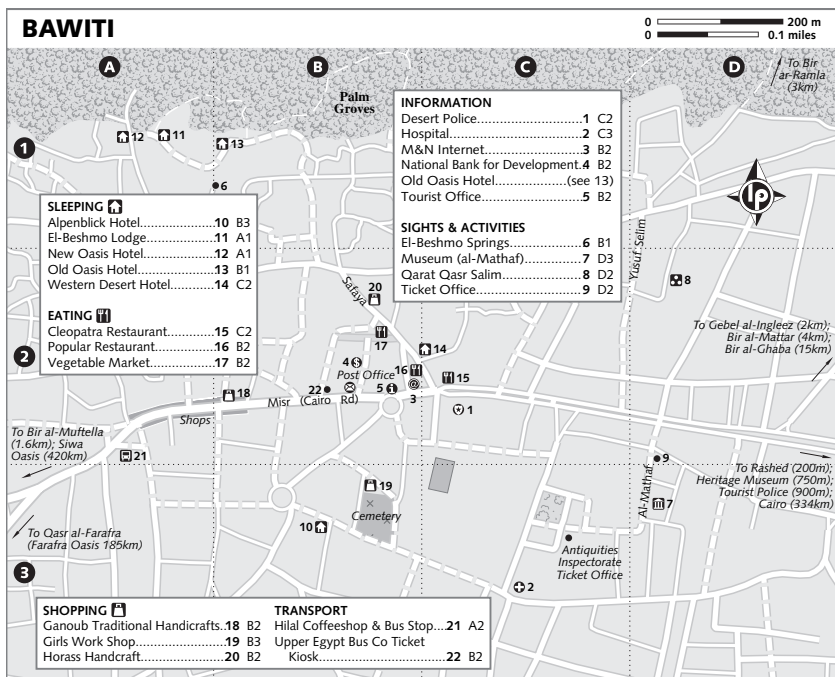
M&N Internet (Map p350; per hr E£10; ☎ 8.30am–9pm Sat–Thu) Near Popular Restaurant, has a couple of newish computers.

National Bank for Development (Map p350; ☎ 9am–2pm Sun–Thu) Changes cash only. No ATM.

Old Oasis Hotel (Map p350; ☎ 3847 3028) Offers internet access.

Tourist office (Map p350; ☎ 3847 3035/9; ☎ 8am–2pm Sat–Thu, also 7–9pm Sat–Thu Nov–Apr) Run by the eager and helpful Mohamed Abd el-Kader, who can also be contacted on ☎ 012 373 6567 or by email (mohamed_kader26@hotmail.com).

Tourist police (off Map p350; ☎ 3847 3900; Sharia Misr)



SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Museum (Al-Mathaf)

Since the discovery of the Golden Mummies in the 1990s (see boxed text, p348), growing interest in Bahariya's ancient past has led to the opening of this new **museum** (Map p350; Sharia al-Mathaf; ☎ 8am-2pm). Yes, that building resembling a war-time bunker is the museum, but don't let that put you off (the ticket office is the hut situated 50m from the museum towards Sharia Misr; see boxed text, opposite). This is where the mummies come to rest. Some of the 10 mummies on show are richly decorated and while the motifs are formulaic and the work is second-rate, the painted faces show a move away from stylised Pharaonic mummy decoration towards Fayoum portraiture (see boxed text, p209). Underneath the beautiful wrappings, the work of the embalmers appears to have been sloppy: in some cases the bodies decayed before the embalming process began, which suggests that these mummies mark the beginning of the end of mummification. Nevertheless, they serve as an eloquent reminder of Bahariya's antiquity.

Qarat Qasr Salim

This small mound (Map p350) amid the houses of Bawiti is likely to have been built upon centuries of debris. There are two well-preserved 26th-dynasty tombs here that were robbed in antiquity and reused as collective burial sites in Roman times. The rock-cut **Tomb of Zed-Amun-ef-ankh** (☎ 8.30am-4pm) is a fascinating glimpse of Bahariya in its heyday. It appears that Zed-Amun-ef-ankh was not a government official but was given the richness of colourful tomb paintings anyway, hinting at his wealth and importance. Researchers assume he was a trader, perhaps a wine merchant or landowner making money out of Bahariya's thriving wine-export business. Unusually, his tomb contains only one chamber, with four circular (as opposed to the usual square) pillars and seven squat false doors.

Next to it lies the **Tomb of Bannentiu** (☎ 8.30am-4pm), his son. Consisting of a four-columned burial chamber with an inner sanctuary, it is covered in fine reliefs depicting Bannentiu in various positions with the gods. The most interesting pictures flank the entrance to the burial chamber. On one side, the journey of

the moon is shown, with the moon, in the form of the god Khons, depicted as a source of life and flanked by the goddesses Isis and Nephthys. The other side of the entrance is decorated with the journey of the sun.

Oasis Heritage Museum

You can't miss Mahmoud Eed's **Oasis Heritage Museum** (Map p349; ☎ 3847 3666; www.camelcamp.com; Bahariya-Cairo rd; admission E£5-10; ⏰ no set opening times), about 2km east of the town's edge on the road to Cairo: this hilltop bastion is announced by massive clay camels gazing longingly onto the street. Inspired by Badr's Museum (p344) in Farafra, its creator wishes to capture, in clay, scenes from traditional village life, among them men hunting or playing *siga* (a game played in the dirt with clay balls or seeds), women weaving and a painful-looking barber/doctor encounter. There is also a display of old oasis dresses and jewellery. Look for the sign saying 'Camel Camp', which is the plain and overpriced accommodation that's also offered here.

Hot & Cold Springs

The closest springs to central Bawiti are the so-called Roman springs, known as **El-Beshmo** (Map p350), beside El-Beshmo Lodge. The view over the oasis gardens and the desert beyond is wonderful, but unfortunately the spring is not suitable for swimming.

The hot sulphurous spring of **Bir al-Ramla** (Map p349), 3km north of town, is very hot (45°C) and suitable for a soak, though you may feel a bit exposed to the donkey traffic passing to and fro. Women should stay well covered.

At **Bir al-Mattar** (Map p349), 7km northeast of Bawiti, cold springs pour into a viaduct, then down into a concrete pool where you can splash around during the hot summer months. As with all the springs the mineral content is high and the water can stain clothing. One of the most satisfying springs to visit is **Bir al-Ghaba** (Map p349), about 15km northeast of Bawiti. It's quite a trek to get out here, but there is nothing quite like a moonlit hot bath on the edge of the desert.

Just past the village of Mandisha, near the Bahariya-Cairo road, huddles **Ain Segam** (Map p349) spring. Hidden behind a large pump house on the edge of a lush palm grove, this is a great place to have a dip or bring a picnic and laze in the shade of the swaying palm fronds.

YOUR TICKET TO ANTIQUITIES

In a move to make their lives a little easier, Bahariya's authorities have decided to issue a one-day ticket that gives entry to five of the oasis' ancient sites: the museum, the tomb of Bannentiu, the Bir al-Muftella and the Temple of Alexander. Tickets are available at the **ticket office** (adult/student E£35/20; ⏰ 8.30am-4pm) of the Museum (Al-Mathaf; opposite). This is annoying as most visitors either don't have the time or the desire to see all the sights the oasis has to offer, yet have to pay for them.

SLEEPING

Unlike most places in the New Valley, there is a very good selection of budget and mid-priced hotels in Bawiti, as well as elsewhere around Bahariya Oasis. The few options approaching the top-end range can be found outside the town; see p354.

Budget

It makes sense to sort out accommodation in Bawiti before you arrive, especially in high season due to the fray of touts that swarm each bus arrival (see boxed text, p352). A tourist policeman now often escorts new arrivals to the Bawiti tourist office where sleeping arrangements can be made in peace.

Desert Safari Home (Map p349; ☎ 3847 1321, 012 731 3908; www.desert-safari-home.com; dm E£15, s/d without bathroom E£35/50, s/d E£45/65, with air-con E£80/100; 🍷) The friendly family that runs this place looks ready to sign your adoption papers the minute you walk in the door. The whitewashed rooms encircle the sort of cute greenery that garden gnomes would feel right at home in and the vine-shaded sitting area is refreshingly cool. The restaurant here serves the usual full dinner for E£20 and has beer. Although it's a long walk from town, patriarch Bardy Khozam will pick you up and offers bicycles for hire.

Alpenblick Hotel (Map p350; ☎ 3847 2184; alp-pen-blick@hotmail.com; off Sharia Misr; d/tr E£50/70) This granddaddy of the Bahariya hotel scene just keeps getting dragged out of retirement by its consecutive owners, though seemingly against its wishes. In a continual state of 'expansion', you can't ignore the fact that the current rooms here are pretty grimy and overpriced.

BAHARIYA TOURS

There is furious competition throughout the oases – and even in Cairo – for tour business, but it is particularly intense in Bahariya. Here, every hotel offers tours, as do a number of eager young men who have taken out bank loans to pay for their cars. The battle for customers is so fierce that most buses arriving in Bahariya are now greeted by a tourist police officer, who will escort foreigners through the throng of aggressive touts to the safe haven of the tourist office. Here Mohamed Abd el-Kader can give you up-to-date information about local hotels and tour operators. He usually suggests only going with a driver approved by your hotel or the tourist office; others may be cheaper, but you will have no comeback if something goes wrong. And things do go wrong; there have been several serious injuries in the past few years and at least one death.

A typical itinerary will take you to the sights in and around Bahariya (Temple of Alexander, Ain el-Muftella, Gebel Dist and Maghrafa) then out through the Black Desert, with a stop at the Crystal Mountain and then into the White Desert.

A day trip to the local sights of Bawiti is around £100 to £150, while a one-night camping trip into the White Desert will cost £150 to £400 per day. If you're travelling into the remote corners of the desert, you'll be looking at £550 to £650 per day. One of the variables is how much of the distance is covered off-road (which uses more fuel and is more wearing on the cars).

Before signing up, check vehicles to make sure they're roadworthy, confirm how much food and drink is supplied (and what this will be), ask how long the operators have been conducting safaris, confirm start and end times (some operators start late in the afternoon and return early in the morning but charge for full days) and try to talk with travellers who have just returned from a trip to get their feedback.

If you're planning on exploring remote parts of the desert such as the Gifl Kebir, Gebel Oweynat or the Great Sand Sea it is absolutely imperative that you go with an outfit that supplies new 4WDs (travelling in convoy), GPS, satellite phones and experienced Bedouin guides. You'll need an official permit for the Great Sand Sea (US\$100, takes 14 days to process).

If you are at all unsure of arrangements, check with Mohamed Abd el-Kader. And be sure to inspect the car, its spare tyres, water and communications before leaving.

New Oasis Hotel (Map p350; ☎ 3847 3030; max_rfs@hotmail.com; by El-Beshmo spring; s/d £50/80, with air-con £100/120; 🚽) A study in curvaceous construction, this small but homely hotel has several teardrop-shaped rooms, some with balconies overlooking the expansive palm groves nearby. Inside, the rooms are aged but kept in good condition, though someone seems to have been a little overzealous with the powder-blue paint.

Midrange & Top End

Western Desert Hotel (Map p350; ☎ 3847 1600; www.westerndeserthotel.com; off Sharia Misr; s/d US\$20/35; 🚽 📺) A new hotel right in the middle of town, opposite Popular Restaurant, the 17 rooms are small, clean, simple and good value. You pay the same price with or without air-con, so it's worth booking ahead and specifying. It has a swish-looking restaurant downstairs that's open 24 hours (though not always in a row, it seems).

Old Oasis Hotel (Map p350; ☎ 3847 3028, 012 232 4425; www.oldsaisafari.com; by El-Beshmo spring; s/d

£80/140, with air-con £120/180; 🚽 📺 📺) Astute owner Saleh Abdallah is at the helm of this hotel, which is one of the most charming places to stay in Bawiti town. The Old Oasis Hotel sits above a pretty, shaded garden of palm and olive trees and has 13 simple but impeccable fan rooms, as well as a few fancier stone-wall air-con rooms. A large pool receives steaming hot water from the nearby spring; the runoff waters the hotel garden. A good restaurant serves full meals (dinner £30) and you can rent a motorbike form here (£150 per day) and access the internet (£10 per hour).

El-Beshmo Lodge (Map p350; ☎ /fax 3847 3500; www.beshmolodge.com; by El-Beshmo spring; s/d £130/200; 🚽 📺) Another old-timer, El-Beshmo Lodge sits beside the spring of the same name (the small pool is filled with spring water). The 25 rooms are simply furnished and reasonably comfortable, with both fan and air-con rooms the same price. There is also a good café-restaurant serving meals, tea, coffee and *sheesha* in a pleasant atmosphere.

EATING

The market houses several places that fire up the barbecue pits and roast cheap chicken and kebab meals after dusk.

Cleopatra Restaurant (Map p350; meals E£5-15; ☎ 6am-10pm) It's worth popping in here just for the smiling welcome and friendly evening chats, though it's also popular for its yummy chicken, *fuul*, *ta'amiyya* and eggs.

Rashed (off Map p350; meals E£12-15) More a cafeteria than a restaurant, Rashed serves hot and cold drinks and *sheeshas* (E£2) as well as simple meals of rice, chicken or meat, and vegetables. It's near the petrol station at the far eastern end of town.

Popular Restaurant (Map p350; meals E£15-20; ☎ 5.30am-10pm) Name it popular, and they will come. Off the main road in Bawiti, this small roadside restaurant is the chosen stopping-off point for many passing through Bawiti. The irrepressible Bayoumi serves the usual selection of chicken, soup, rice and vegetable dishes, though quality seems to be slipping while prices are creeping up. There's cold beer too.

SHOPPING

There is a living craft tradition in the oases, though puzzlingly many handicraft stores sell crafts made elsewhere.

Girls Work Shop (Map p350; south of Sharia Misr; ☎ 10am-1pm Sat-Thu) This great handicrafts store bucks the trend and sells only crafts made in Bahariya Oasis, thus providing local women with skills and much-needed work. Nice one!

Ganoub Traditional Handicrafts (Map p350; Sharia Misr; ☎ closed Tue) A tasteful little shop with the best selection of crafts in Bawiti, brought from all over Egypt, including camel-wool blankets and traditional oasis robes. It also has a small selection of books on the desert as well as postcards.

Horass Handcraft (Map p350; on the way to El-Beshmo spring; ☎ 8am-8pm) Sells some locally made crafts, including hand-decorated pouches cleverly marketed as 'mobile phone holders' or, our favourite, 'guidebook holder'. It also has standard adorned traditional Bedouin costumes and camel-hair socks. If the shop is closed knock on the door directly across the street.

GETTING THERE & AWAY**Bus**

Upper Egypt Bus Co (Map p350; ☎ 3847 3610; Sharia Misr; ☎ roughly 9am-1pm & 7-11pm) runs buses to Cairo (E£25, three to four hours) at 6.30am,

10am, 3pm and around midnight. Extra buses originate in Dakhla and pass through town around noon and midnight, stopping at the Hilal Coffeehouse at the western end of town and at the ticket office.

If you're heading to Farafra (E£20, one to two hours) and Dakhla (E£40, four to five hours), you can pick up one of the buses from Cairo that are supposed to leave Bahariya at 12.30pm and 11.30pm. Passengers are usually dropped off at Popular Restaurant before the bus continues down the street to one of the coffeehouses at the western end of town, stopping for 30 minutes.

Only some bus tickets can be booked from the Upper Egypt Bus Co booking office in Bawiti. As most of the buses don't originate here, you either have to book in Cairo or take your chances on standing.

Service Taxi

Microbus service taxis run from Bawiti to Moneeb (near the bus station) in Cairo whenever they have enough customers. A seat costs about E£20. A microbus to Farafra (they're not very frequent) will cost E£20. Tickets can be bought opposite the desert police station (Map p350) or ask at Popular Restaurant (left).

There are no service taxis to Siwa, so you will have to hire a private 4WD for the rough journey (permit required). Expect to pay around E£800 to E£1500. If there is a 4WD that has arrived from Siwa and is returning empty, you might be able to get a ride with it for half that amount. Recent changes in legislation make it easy to arrange same-day permits to travel to Siwa (US\$5 per person).

Around Bawiti

The area's antiquities (eg Tomb of Alexander and Temple of Ain al-Muftella) have been recently spruced up and mostly reopened to the public. Surrounding the town are mud-brick villages and palm gardens, many fed by springs that are ideal for a night-time soak. Further afield lies some spectacular desert scenery; Black Desert, Gebel Dist and Gebel Maghrafra can be seen on a day trip or on an overnight safari.

The following sights and sleeping options feature on the Bahariya Oasis map (p349).

SIGHTS**Temple of Alexander**

Southwest of Bawiti, just beyond Ahmed's Safari Camp, is the only place in Egypt where

Alexander the Great's image and cartouche have been found – although since being uncovered by archaeologists in the late 1930s these have been mostly worn away by the wind. Alexander was known to have visited Siwa, but there is no evidence to suggest that he passed through Bahariya, so his likeness here is puzzling. The corrosive desert winds, combined with some insensitive restoration, have left this site pretty bare with few clues to its original splendour.

Temple of Ain al-Muftella

Slightly south of the spring of the same name are four 26th-dynasty chapels that together form the Temple of Ain al-Muftella. The bulk of the building was ordered by 26th-dynasty high priest Zed-Khonsu-ef-ankh, whose tomb was recently discovered under houses in Bawiti (but is still closed to the public). Archaeologists suspect that the chapels could have been built during the New Kingdom and then significantly expanded during the Late Period and added to during Greek and Roman times. All have been extensively restored and have been given wooden roofs to protect them from the elements.

Qarat al-Hilwa

This sandstone ridge is about 3km southwest of Bawiti, northwest of the road to Farafra. In the New Kingdom this was a necropolis, a burial place of successive governors who, as representatives of the pharaoh, were the most powerful figures in the oasis. The 18th-dynasty **Tomb of Amenhotep Huy** is the only inscribed tomb left in the necropolis, but there is little to see there now. The faded, sunken reliefs here once showed scenes of Amenhotep's dreams for the afterlife: banquet tables groaning with fruit, cakes, flowers and casks of wine.

Other Sights Around Bawati

There are a number of other sights in Bahariya that are included as part of a tour by the many safari operators in Bawiti. Most can also be done on foot if the weather is cool.

Gebel Mandisha is a ridge capped with black dolomite and basalt that runs for 4km behind the village of the same name, just east of Bawiti.

Clearly visible from the road to Cairo, flat-topped **Gebel al-Ingleez**, also known as the Black Mountain, takes its name from the remains of a WWI lookout post. From here Captain

Williams, a British officer, monitored the movements of Libyan Senussi tribesmen.

Gebel Dist is an impressive pyramid-shaped mountain that can be seen from most of the oasis. A local landmark, it is famous for its fossils – dinosaur bones were found here in the early 20th century, disproving the previously held theory that dinosaurs only lived in North America. In 2001 researchers from the University of Pennsylvania found the remains of another huge dinosaur, *Paralititan stromeri*. The discovery of this giant herbivore, which the team deduced was standing on the edge of a tidal channel when it died 94 million years ago, makes it likely that Bahariya was once a swamp similar to the Florida everglades. About 100m away is **Gebel Maghrafa** (Mountain of the Ladle).

For a brief glimpse of what Bawiti might have been like before cement had its way with it, it's worth venturing to the bucolic hamlet of **El-Agouz**. The village, 3.5km east of Bawiti, was supposedly founded by several families cast out from Siwa for the promiscuity of their womenfolk, though it's probably best not to remind locals of that. Here you'll still find low-slung, mud-brick buildings among the swaying palms and extremely friendly inhabitants dishing out smiles like they're going out of style. The road to El-Agouz, which is off the Bahariya–Cairo road, continues for several kilometres to the town of **Zabou**, which lies nearly engulfed by the shifting desert sands, and loops back to **Mandisha** on the main highway. To get here, hop on any microbus heading east from Bawiti and ask to be let off at El-Agouz.

One of the most magnificent springs we have yet seen is **Ain Gomma** (off Map p349), a fair distance away at 45km south of Bawiti. Cool and crystal-clear water gushes into this small spring as it sits surrounded by the vast desert expanse on all sides – the views are amazing. There's a shady, cushioned café here where you can buy tea and soft drinks. Situated near the town of El-Hayz, it's difficult to reach without your own transport, though many safari trips to the White Desert will stop here en route. You can also stay at nearby **Under the Moon Camp** (below).

SLEEPING & EATING

Budget

Badr Sahara Camp (☎ 3847 2955; www.badrshaharacamp.com; Gebel al-Ingleez; huts per person ££25) A couple of

kilometres from town, Badr Sahara Camp has a handful of bucolic, African-influenced, two-bed huts each with small patio sitting areas out front. Hot water and electricity can't always be counted on, but cool desert breezes and knockout views of the oasis valley can. Pick-ups available.

Bedouin Village Camp (☎ /fax 3847 6811; www.beduinvillage.com; El-Agouz; s/d £E30/60) A Bedouin-themed camp with small, shabby rooms circling a central thatched area. The atmosphere is friendly and the place is not without charm; as a bonus, owner Abdelsadiq Elbadrmani, an accomplished Bedouin musician, provides the evening entertainment. It's in the ambrosial village of El-Agouz (see also opposite).

Ahmed's Safari Camp (☎ /fax 3847 2090; www.ahmedsafariacamp.com; r per person £E45, with air-con £E95; ☎ ☎ ☎) About 4km west of Bawiti, near the Siwa road, Ahmed's is an old favourite among travellers and trans-Africa groups. There are cool, pleasant, domed double rooms as well as more basic ones (some of which have air-con, the rest fans), or you can sleep under the stars on the roof (£E5). Simple meals (£E55) and beer are available, which is just as well because it's a long walk to town if you have no transport. There's a hot spring a few steps from the hotel.

Nature Camp (☎ 012 337 5097, in Cairo 02-847 2184; naturecamps@hotmail.com; Bir al-Ghaba; r half board per person £E70) At the foot of Gebel Dist, Nature Camp sets new standards for environmentally focused budget accommodation. The peaceful cluster of candlelit and intricately designed thatch huts looks out onto the expansive desert beside Bir al-Ghaba. The food is very good (meals £E25) and the owner, Ashraf Lotfe, is a skilled desert hand. Only some rooms have bathrooms attached. Staff will drive you the 17km into Bawiti if you arrive without transport.

Under the Moon Camp (off Map p349; ☎ 3847 2838, 012 423 6580; www.helaltravel.com; El-Hayz; s/d half board £E90/160) Isolated in the small oasis hamlet of El-Hayz, 45km south of Bawiti, this neat camp has several round mud-brick huts scattered around a desert compound. The accommodation is very modest, but the pyramid-roofed abodes are cheerfully painted and well kept. The lovely Ain Gomma spring (opposite) is nearby, but apart from that, and the brilliant desert scenery, there's not a whole lot to do out here. The owners run safari trips and arrange pick-ups from Bawiti.

Midrange & Top End

International Hot Springs Hotel (☎ 3847 3014; www.whitedeserttours.com; s/d/tr half board US\$38/60/78) About 3km outside Bawiti on the road to Cairo, this German-run three-star spa resort has forgettable architecture, but its 36 rooms and eight chalets are very comfortable, built around a hot spring and set in a delightful garden. As well as a deep pool of therapeutic spring water there's a gym, sauna, rooftop lounging area and a good restaurant. Owner Peter Wirth is an old Western Desert hand and organises recommended trips throughout the area.

Qasr el-Bawity Hotel & Restaurant (☎ 3847 1880, in Cairo 02-753 8108; www.qasrelbawity.com; s/d half board US\$40/80, ste US\$200/250; ☎ ☎) The relatively new Qasr el-Bawity offers some of the swankiest accommodation in Bahariya. With a finely trained eye for environmentally friendly design, this place has sumptuous rooms finished in cool stonework and sporting ornate domed roofs, fine furniture and arty, frilly touches. There are two pools (one natural and one chlorinated) and the restaurant here is suitably good.

Palma Village Hotel (☎ 3849 6969/99, 012 468 1024; s/d half board US\$45/60; ☎) Along the desert road between El-Agouz and Mandisha villages, this place has a whiff of the Wild West about it (the stagecoach out front is a dead giveaway). If you can ignore the chintzy foyer, the rooms are great value, with wrought-iron furniture and some of the nicest bathrooms in all of Bahariya with, wait for it, real baths. It also runs nearby horse stables that offer rides for £E18 per hour.

SIWA OASIS

☎ 046 / pop 21,800

If, like most visitors to Siwa, you are driving the 300km south from the coast through the monotonously featureless and desolate desert, you'll be rubbing your eyes thinking that your first sight of Siwa is an emerald mirage. Set against a backdrop of jagged sandstone hills, backed by the rolling silica ocean of the Great Sand Sea and carpeted thick with palm groves, this is easily the most captivating oasis in Egypt. Here, an abundance of free-flowing freshwater springs support hundreds of thousands of olive and fruit trees and date palms, which also shade and cool the valley's mud-brick villages as they rest concealed in the greenery.

Siwa's very isolation helped protect a unique society that until today stands apart from mainstream Egyptian culture. Originally settled by Berbers (roaming North African tribes), Siwa was still practically independent only a few hundred years ago. For centuries the oasis had contact with only the few caravan traders that passed along this way via Qara, Qattara and Kerdassa (near Cairo), and the occasional determined pilgrim seeking the famous Oracle of Amun. Even today local traditions and Siwi, the local Berber language, dominate.

Siwa is less about rushing around any major sights than it is about sitting back with a cup of tea or a *sheesha* and letting the halcyon days wash over you. It's hard to feel pressured in a place where donkey carts still outnumber combustion engines. The hectares of palm groves invite casual strolling, numerous comfortable and cushioned cafés are perfect for chilling and meeting fellow travellers, and dozens of clear springs practically beg for you to dip your toes. As increasing numbers of independent travellers discover the tranquil joys of this remote paradise, local inhabitants are ever more mindful of retaining their traditions and limiting the sort of uncontrolled 'development' that has scarred more popular tourist destinations in Egypt.

History

Siwa has a long and ancient, ancient past: in late 2007 a human footprint was found that could date back three million years, making it the oldest known human print in the world. Flints discovered in the oasis further prove that it was inhabited in Palaeolithic and Neolithic times, but beyond that Siwa's early history remains shrouded in mystery.

The oldest monuments in the oasis, including the Temple of the Oracle, date from the 26th dynasty, when Egypt was invaded by the Assyrians. Siwa's Oracle of Amun (p359) was already famous then, and Egyptologists suspect that it dates back to the earlier 21st dynasty, when the Amun priesthood and oracles became prominent throughout Egypt.

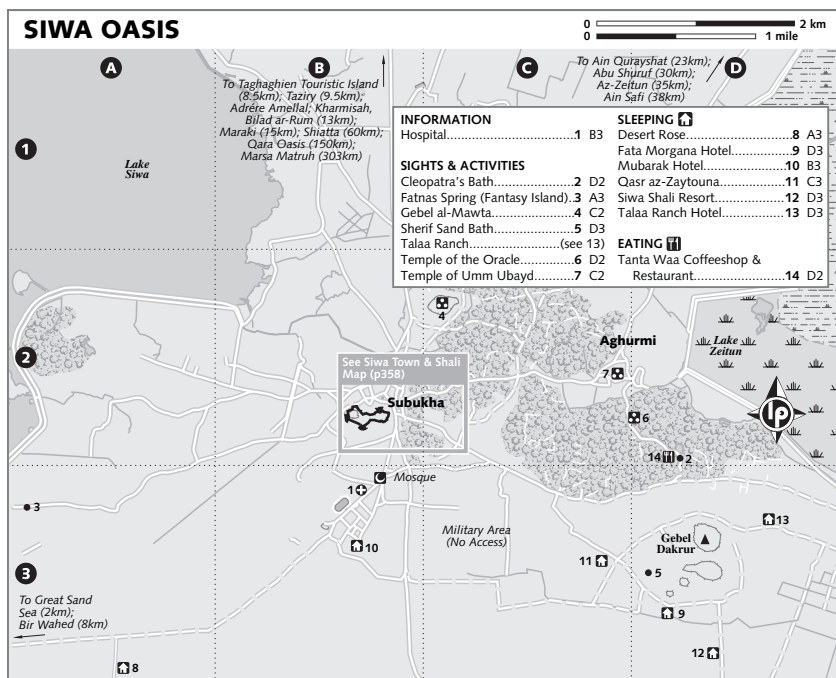
Such was the fame of Siwa's oracle that it threatened the Persians, who invaded Egypt in 525 BC and ended the 26th dynasty. One of the Western Desert's most persistent legends is of the lost army of Persian king, Cambyses, which was sent to destroy the oracle and disappeared completely in the desert (see boxed

text, p346). This only helped increase the prestige of the oracle and reinforce the political power of the Amun priesthood.

The oracle's power, and with it Siwa's fame, grew throughout the ancient world. The young conqueror Alexander the Great led a small party on a perilous eight-day journey across the desert in 331 BC. It is believed that the priests of Amun, who was the supreme god of the Egyptian pantheon and later associated with the Greek god Zeus, declared him to be a son of the god. On coins minted after this time, Alexander was often portrayed with the ram's horns associated with Amun. Ptolemaic leaders, anxious to prove their credentials, also made the trek. The tombs at Gebel al-Mawta (p359) are testament to the prosperity of the oasis during this period.

The end of Roman rule, the collapse of the trade route and the gradual decline in the influence of oracles in general all contributed to Siwa's gentle slide into obscurity. While Christianity spread through most of Egypt, there is no evidence that it ever reached Siwa and priests continued to worship Amun here until the 6th century AD. The Muslim conquerors, who crossed the desert in 708, were defeated several times by the fierce Siwans. However, there was a cost to this isolation: it is said that by 1203 the population had declined to just 40 men, who moved from Aghurmi to found the new fortress-town of Shali. The oasis finally converted to Islam around the 12th century, and gradually built up wealth trading date and olive crops along the Nile Valley, and with Libyan Fezzan and the Bedouins.

European travellers arrived at the end of the 18th century – WG Browne in 1792 and Frederick Hornemann in 1798 – but most were met with a hostile reception and several narrowly escaped with their lives. The Siwans thus gained a reputation for being fiercely independent and hostile to non-Muslim outsiders. Throughout the 19th century, the Egyptian government also had problems trying to gain the loyalty of the oasis. Siwa was again visited in WWII, when the British and Italian/German forces chased each other in and out of Siwa and Jaghub, 120km west in Libya, until Rommel turned his attention elsewhere. By then the Siwans were politically incorporated into Egypt, but the oasis remained physically isolated until an asphalt road connected it to Marsa Matruh in the 1980s. As a result, Siwans still speak their own



distinct Berber dialect and have a strong local culture, quite distinct from the rest of Egypt. The oasis is now home to 20,000 Siwans and just over 1000 Egyptians.

Information

EMERGENCY

Tourist police (Map p358; ☎ 460 2047; Siwa Town)

INTERNET ACCESS

El-Jawhara International Call (Map p358; ☎ 460 1180; Sidi Suleyman, Siwa Town; per hr E£10; ☎ 8am-1am) Has three computers and what might just be the fastest connection in town. Just.

El-Negma Internet Centre (Map p358; ☎ 460 0761; 59 central market sq, Siwa Town; per hr E£10; ☎ 9am-midnight) Also reasonably good computers.

Siwa Oasis Net (Map p358; ☎ 460 2049; central market sq, Siwa Town; ☎ 10am-2.30pm & 6-11pm)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital (Map p357; ☎ 460 0459; Sadat St, Siwa Town) Only for emergencies.

Pharmacy Al-Ansar (Map p358; ☎ 460 1310; central market sq & Sharia Sadat, Siwa Town; ☎ 8am-2pm & 4pm-2am)

MONEY

Banque du Caire (Map p358; Siwa Town; ☎ 8.30am-2pm, also 5-8pm Oct-Apr) Purported to be the only all mud-brick bank in the world, there's an ATM here that works more often than not. Located next to the police station.

PERMITS

A permit is needed to venture off the beaten track from Siwa, but this is easily arranged by local guides. Mahdi Hweiti at the Siwa tourist office (p358) will arrange permissions quite quickly (but not on Friday), at the fixed rate of US\$5, plus an extra E£11 for the local Mukhabarat (Intelligence Police) office. The same rate applies for the permit needed to travel from Siwa to Bahariya. You'll need your passport.

Note that most permits will be valid for one day only, and although overnight trips can be easily arranged, they are not always permitted.

POST & TELEPHONE

Main post office (Map p358; behind Arous al-Waha Hotel, Siwa Town; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu)

Telephone centrale (Map p358; Siwa Town; ☎ 24hr)
Located at the beginning of the Marsa Matruh road.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist office (Map p358; ☎ 460 1338; mahdi_hweiti@yahoo.com; Siwa Town; ☎ 9am-2pm Sat-Thu, plus 5-8pm Oct-Apr) The local tourist officer Mahdi Hweiti is very helpful and knowledgeable and has plenty of information about travelling in the oases. He also sells an informative local guide (££20) and can help arrange trips to some of the surrounding villages or the desert. He can be reached on his mobile (☎ 010 546 1992). In the evening, you can watch an interesting documentary about Siwa in English, French or German.

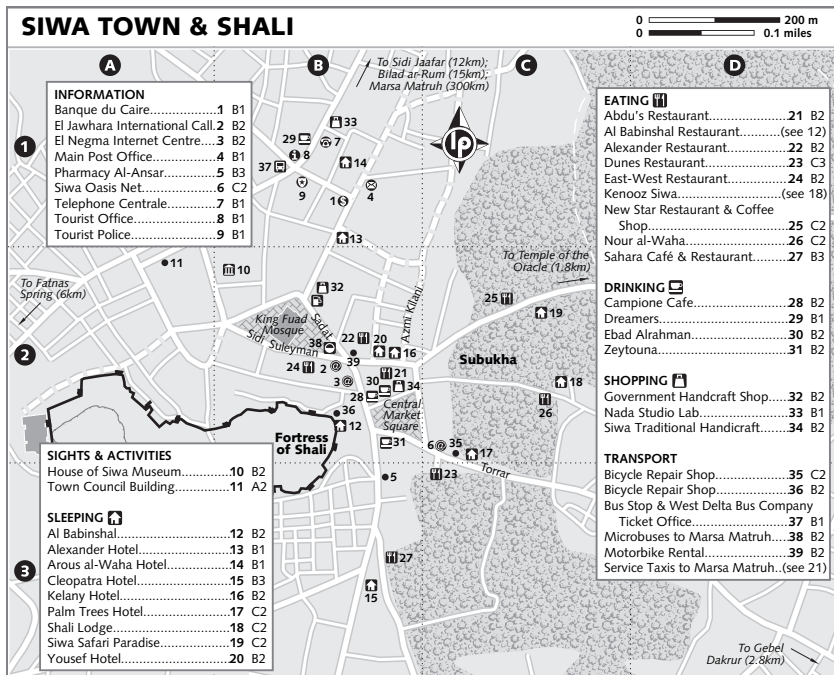
Sights & Activities

Even though there are a number of fascinating sights hidden in the dense palm greenery of this oasis, the main attraction in Siwa remains its serene ambience. Strolling through the palm groves or relaxing over a cup of tea as the townspeople go about their languid paces seems to be the order of the day. Occasional visits to one of the wonderful springs in the area offer further distractions, and bicycles can be a suitably paced form of transport that can

be rented nearly everywhere. In Siwa Town there's a good ethnographic museum and the old fort of Shali, as well as the ancient remains at Aghurmi and the Gebel al-Mawta. Day trips by jeep to the surrounding villages, the desert or to Bir Wahed, a cold freshwater lake and a hot spring in the dunes, can easily be arranged. Or you can go further and arrange an overnight safari into the Great Sand Sea.

SIWA TOWN

Siwa is a pleasant little town centred around a market square, where roads lead off into the palm groves in nearly every direction. Around the corner from the local council offices is the small **House of Siwa Museum** (Map p358; adult/student ££10/5; ☎ 10am-noon Sun-Thu), which contains a modest display of traditional clothing, jewellery and crafts typical of the oasis. It was inspired by a Canadian diplomat who feared that Siwan culture and its mud-brick houses would disappear in a flood of poured cement and modernity. You can arrange to see the museum through the tourist office or find the custodian at the nearby Town Council Building (Map p358).



RESPECTING LOCAL TRADITION

Siwans are very proud of their traditions, which are part of what makes the place so unique. They are particularly sensitive where female modesty is concerned. The least visitors can do to help preserve Siwa's culture is to respect local sensibilities and act accordingly. Modest dress is appreciated and women travellers in particular should make sure they cover their upper arms and their legs, and wear baggy T-shirts over bathing suits when taking a dip in any of the numerous springs. Do not, as the tourist office puts it, show 'displays of affection' in public.

The centre of the town is dominated by the spectacular organic shapes of the remains of the 13th-century mud-brick **fortress of Shali** (Map p358). Built from a material known locally as *kershef* (large chunks of salt from the lake just outside town, mixed with rock and plastered in local clay), the labyrinth of huddled buildings was originally four or five storeys high and housed hundreds of people. For centuries, few outsiders were admitted inside – and even fewer came back out to tell the tale. But three days of rain in 1926 caused more damage than any invader had managed and, over the last decades, inhabitants moved to newer and more comfortable houses with running water and electricity. Now only a few buildings around the edges are occupied or used for storage, including the **mosque** (Map p358) with its old, chimney-shaped minaret. Those who wander around the outskirts of the fort are likely to be rewarded with glimpses of life as it used to be; there's an old donkey-powered oil press back here, and you should listen out for the clanging of a real-life metal smith plying his trade.

With each rainfall more of these buildings disintegrate. However, Siwans are beginning to value the uniqueness of their heritage, as well as the need to preserve it. Recently authorities have been working with an international NGO to reinforce what's left of the fortress using traditional building techniques.

AGHURMI

Before Shali was founded in the 13th century, Siwa's main settlement was at Aghurmi, 4km

east of the present town of Siwa. It was here that in 331 BC Alexander the Great consulted the oracle (see p356) at the 26th-dynasty **Temple of the Oracle** (Map p357; adult/student ££20/10; ☎ 9am-4pm). Built in the 6th century BC, probably on top of an earlier temple, it was dedicated to Amun (occasionally referred to as Zeus or Jupiter Ammon) and was a powerful symbol of the town's wealth. One of the most revered oracles in the ancient Mediterranean, its power was such that some rulers sought its advice while others sent armies to destroy it (see boxed text, p346).

Today the Temple of the Oracle sits in the northwest corner of the ruins of Aghurmi village. Though treasure hunters have been at work here and the buttressed temple was poorly restored in the 1970s, it remains an evocative site, steeped in history. Surrounded by the ruins of Aghurmi, it has awesome views over the oasis palm-tops.

About 200m further along the track stands the remains of the almost totally ruined **Temple of Umm Ubayd** (Map p357), also dedicated to Amun. This was originally connected to the Temple of the Oracle by a causeway and was used during oracle rituals. Early drawings have revealed that the structure was built by Nectanebo II during the 30th dynasty. Nineteenth-century travellers saw more of it than we can: a Siwan governor in need of building material blew up the temple in 1896 to construct the town's modern mosque and police building. Today only part of a wall covered with inscriptions survives.

GEBEL AL-MAWTA

A small hill at the northern end of Siwa Town, **Gebel al-Mawta** (Map p357; adult/student ££20/10; ☎ 9am-4pm) – whose name means Mountain of the Dead – is honeycombed with rock tombs, most dating back to the 26th dynasty, Ptolemaic and Roman times. Only 1km from the centre of town, the tombs were used by the Siwans as shelters when the Italians bombed the oasis during WWII. Many new tombs were discovered at this time but were not properly excavated. In his book *Siwa Oasis*, Ahmed Fakhry recalls British soldiers paying Siwan families a few piastres to cut away large chunks of tomb paintings to keep as souvenirs.

Despite the damage, some paintings have survived. The best are in the **Tomb of Si Amun**, where beautifully coloured reliefs portray the dead man, thought to be a wealthy Greek

landowner or merchant, making offerings and praying to Egyptian gods. Also interesting are the unfinished **Tomb of Mesu-Isis**, with a beautiful depiction of cobras in red and blue above the entrance; the **Tomb of Niperpathot**, with inscriptions and crude drawings in the same reddish ink you can see on modern Siwan pottery; and finally the **Tomb of the Crocodile**, whose badly deteriorating wall paintings include a yellow crocodile representing the god Sobek.

HOT & COLD SPRINGS

Siwa has no shortage of active, bubbling springs hidden among its palm groves. Following the track that leads to the Temple of the Oracle and continuing past the Temple of Umm Ubayd, will lead you to the most famous spring, **Cleopatra's Bath** (Spring of the Sun; Map p357). The crystal-clear natural spring water gurgles up into a large stone pool, which is a popular bathing spot for locals. Women should think twice about swimming here during the day, and if they decide to brave the stares then they should only bathe with their clothes on. There are changing rooms at the nearby Tanta Waa café.

There's a similar but slightly more secluded pool at **Fatnas Spring** (Map p357), the small island in the salty Birket Siwa (Lake Siwa) accessible across a narrow causeway. Nicknamed 'Fantasy Island' for its idyllic setting, the pool is about 6km from Siwa Town, and surrounded by palm trees and lush greenery. Although it is a safer place for a swim than Cleopatra's Bath, women should not swim alone and, again, should leave their bikinis for the Red Sea beaches. There's a small café among the palms, which is good for sitting and puffing on a *sheesha*, or drinking a cold beer if it's available. This is an idyllic place to watch the sunset. A ministry of agriculture project to try and improve the lake's drainage has left the 'island' high and dry, so that the café now looks out over salty mudflats rather than water.

A favourite excursion among local guides is the cold freshwater lake at **Bir Wahed** (off Map p357), 15km away on the edge of the Great Sand Sea. Once over the top of a high dune, you come to a hot spring, the size of a large Jacuzzi, where sulphurous water bubbles in a pool and runs off to irrigate a garden. Cooling down in the lake, and then watching the sun setting over the dunes while soaking in a hot

WARNING

To oasis dwellers, a woman walking alone in palm gardens is provocative and she could find herself in trouble. Single women should either avoid the palms or find a companion to stroll with.

spring is a surreal experience. The thorns in this rose are the mosquitoes that bite at sunset. Because it's far from town, women can wear bathing suits here without offending locals. Bir Wahed can only be reached by 4WD, so if you don't have your own, you'll need to hire a guide and car. Permits are needed to visit Bir Wahed (see p357).

PALM GARDENS

One of Siwa's greatest attractions is the oasis itself, which boasts more than 300,000 palm trees, 70,000 olive trees and a great many fruit orchards. The vegetation is sustained by more than 300 freshwater springs and streams, and the area attracts an amazing variety of bird life, including quail and falcons.

OUTLYING VILLAGES

There are a few tumbledown villages about 15km northwest of Siwa Town (all shown off the Siwa Oasis map, p357). **Kharmisah** has five natural springs and is renowned for the quality of its olive gardens. **Bilad ar-Rum** (City of the Romans) has about 100 tombs cut into the rock of the nearby hills and the ruins of a stone temple, which is rumoured to be the final resting place of Alexander the Great. Both are Berber villages and can be reached by local bus.

About 2km west of here is **Maraq**, where Lianna Souvaltzi, a Greek archaeologist, claimed in 1995 to have found the tomb of Alexander the Great. Her findings proved controversial and the Egyptian authorities revoked her permit and closed the site.

Sixty kilometres west of Siwa Town, the town of **Shiatta** sits lapping at the edge of the Great Sand Sea. There's a salt spring here, thought to be all that's left of a lake that once reached all the way to Siwa Town, where an ancient Egyptian boat was discovered lying 7m down, possibly used to sail to the Temple of the Oracle. These days, this area is mainly used by Bedouin tribes for grazing livestock and has some first-rate views of the desert mountains.

There are more springs to the east of Siwa Town (shown off the Siwa Oasis map, p357). **Ain Qurayshat** is 27km out from the town and has the largest free-flowing spring in the oasis. **Abu Shuruf**, a clean spring said by locals to have healing properties, is 7km further east from Ain Qurayshat in the next palm thicket. The clear water here is about 3m deep and spills into Lake Zeitun, another huge saltwater lake. Another 5km brings you to **Az-Zeitun**, an abandoned mud-brick village beaten by the sand and wind that sits alone on the sandy plain. Hundreds of Roman-era tombs have been discovered about 2km beyond Az-Zeitun and are currently under excavation, although little of interest has so far been found.

From Az-Zeitun, another 3km brings you to **Ain Safi**, the last human vestige before the overwhelming wall of desert dunes that stretches for hundreds of kilometres, all the way south to Al-Kharga Oasis. Some 30 Bedouin families live at Ain Safi.

To visit these sights you'll need your own sturdy vehicle. Mahdi Hweiti at the tourist office (p358), and almost every restaurant and hotel in town, organises trips. None of these sights, with the exception of Shiatta, require permits.

Tours

Almost all restaurants and hotels in Siwa offer tours, ranging from half a day in the desert around Siwa Town to a full five- or six-day safari. Siwa Safari Paradise (p362) arranges tours using its own fleet of 4WDs, though this is an expensive option. The Palm Trees Hotel (p362) and Abdu's Restaurant (p364) have established a good reputation for their trips. The tourist office (p358) can also be a great help in organising tours around the oasis.

All desert trips require permits, which cost US\$5 plus E£11 and are usually obtained by your guide from the tourist office. Prices and itineraries vary, but one of the most popular trips takes you to the desert hot spring at Bir Wahed, on the edge of the Great Sand Sea. Here you can have a simple meal or tea, then move on to the nearby spring-fed lake, where, in the summer, you can take a dip. Usually you will do a spot of dune driving, stop at fossil sites and see some fantastic desert vistas before returning to Siwa. This half-day trip costs about E£80 per person plus permission costs.

Other popular half-day itineraries include a tour of the springs Ain Qurayshat, Abu Shuruf, Az-Zeitun and Ain Safi (E£50 per person); and a tour of Siwa Town and its environs (Temple of the Oracle, Gebel al-Mawta, Cleopatra's Bath, Shali fortress and Fatnas; E£30). Overnight trips vary in length according to destination but a popular one-night trip is to Qara Oasis (E£300 to E£500 per vehicle, depending on whether asphalt or desert track is taken). Most trips are done by 4WD, so ensure that the vehicle is roadworthy before you set out and, as with any desert trip, that you have enough water.

Camels were recently introduced to the oasis to do desert trips. Sherif Fahmy of the **Talaa Ranch** (Map p357; ☎ 010 588 6003; talaaranchsiwa@hotmail.com; Gebel Dakrur) can arrange camel tours to watch the sunset from the sand dunes or a longer desert safari, though prices are a bit steep at E£350 for a day and night or E£150 per half-day. Abdul at **Shali Camel Safaris Ranch** (☎ 010 194 1653) also organises camel tours, with all meals included, at a slightly lower cost.

Festivals & Events

Gebel Dakrur is the scene of the annual **Siyaha festival**. For three days around the October full moon, thousands of Siwans gather to celebrate the date harvest, renewing friendships and settling any quarrels that might have broken out over the previous year. All Siwans, no matter what their financial or social standing, eat together at a huge feast after the noon prayer each day during the festival. The festival is intertwined with Sufism, and each evening, hundreds of men form a circle and join together in a *zikr*, a long session of dancing, swaying and singing repetitive songs in praise of God. Siwan women do not attend the festivities, although girls up to about the age of 12 are present until sunset. Each year hundreds of non-Siwans – Egyptians and foreigners – attend the festival.

Once a year, just after the corn harvest in late summer, the small tomb shrine of Sidi Suleiman, behind the King Fuad Mosque in the centre of Siwa Town, is the scene of a *moulid* (Saints' festival), known in Siwi as the **Moulid at-Tagmigra**. Banners announce the *moulid*, and *zikrs* are performed outside the tomb.

Occasionally on Thursday nights, after the evening prayer, local Sufis of the Arusiya order

gather near the tomb shrine for a *zikk* and they don't mind the odd foreigner watching.

Sleeping

Siwa has a great collection of places to bed down in, with everything from competitively priced budget pads to dazzling top-end options. The choices here are expanding yearly, and the competition helps keep standards high and prices down. Many midrange and top-end sleeping options can also be found further afield in Siwa Oasis, around Gebel Dakrur and Sidi Jaafar.

The police here are jittery about people camping close to town. If you really want to avoid other people, you're better off organising a trip to the desert with one of the many local operators (see p361).

SIWA TOWN

Budget

Yousef Hotel (Map p358; ☎ 460 0678; central market sq; dm/d without bathroom £8/16, d £24) With the cheapest beds in town, Yousef is perennially full with backpacking budgeters. The rooms are a bit tattered and kept barely above minimum hygiene levels, but the four-storey rooftop has great views of the oasis and a kitchen that guests are free to use. Noise can be an issue.

Palm Trees Hotel (Map p358; ☎ 460 1703; salahali2@yahoo.com; Sharia Torrar; s/d without bathroom £15/25, s/d £35/45, bungalows £50) This deservedly popular budget hotel has sufficiently tidy rooms, all with screened windows, fans and balconies. The shady, tranquil garden with date-palm furniture is delightful (but mosquito intensive), and the few ground-level bungalows have porches spilling onto the greenery. Breakfast costs ££5.

Cleopatra Hotel (Map p358; ☎ 460 0421; www.cleopatra-siwa.net; s/d £18/31, with balcony £35/45) A respectable budget option at the southern end of town. While the cheaper rooms in the main building are a little scruffy, the quieter building out back is much neater and has respectable, balconied rooms.

Alexander Hotel (Map p358; ☎ 460 0512; s/d £20/30, with air-con £30/60; 🏠) Another humble ode to concrete and tile, the Alexander has typically austere rooms, clean sheets and bathrooms that have seen better days. However, it does boast the cheapest air-con abodes in town.

Kelany Hotel (Map p358; ☎ 460 1052, 012 403 9218; zaitsafari@yahoo.com; central market sq; r £50-70, with

breakfast ££60-80) A modern hotel in a good location, the Kelany has 10 sparkling rooms, spic-and-span bathrooms, hot and cold water and friendly management, though it comes up a bit short on the character front.

Arous al-Waha Hotel (Map p358; ☎ 460 0028; s/d ££51/63; 🏠) If it wasn't for the sand-coloured paint job, we'd swear this old hotel had escaped from a communist housing block. The rooms at this former government rest house are austere, orderly and spacious, though the management seems a little bewildered by walk-in guests. It's opposite the tourist office, at the beginning of the Marsa Matruh road.

Desert Rose (Map p357; ☎ 012 440 8164; ali_siwa@hotmail.com; s/d/tr ££60/90/125; 🏠) Overlooking the magnificent dunes that stretch out to the southeast of Siwa, this friendly and cosy little hotel has creatively decorated, spotless rooms in a funky octagonal building. Extremely good value, it has its own clear pool of natural spring water, a roof terrace for sunset adulation, indoor and outdoor fireplaces and a smattering of cushioned chill-out areas. Guests can prepare their own meals in the kitchen or eat food prepared by the staff. The silence is only disturbed by the barking of dogs.

Midrange & Top End

Mubarak Hotel (Map p357; ☎ 460 0883; s/d ££150/200; 🏠) Based in the sports complex, this modern, pink, curving monolith has rooms perpetually kept in spotless condition, access to a gym, squash courts and sauna. Pity it's fairly characterless, usually empty and isolated at the southern end of town.

Siwa Safari Paradise (Map p358; ☎ 460 1590; www.siwaparadise.com; s/d bungalow half board US\$35/49, with air-con US\$40/55, ste US\$60/75; 🏠 🏠) Laid out along a maze of garden paths, this three-star resort mainly attracts northern Europeans looking to sunbake by the natural spring pool. The decoration is quite tacky but the rooms are cool and comfortable, so it is not a bad option if other recommended hotels are full.

Shali Lodge (Map p358; ☎ 460 1299; info@eqi.com.eg; Sharia Subukha; s/d US\$45/60; 🏠) This tiny, beautiful mud-brick hotel, owned by environmentalist Mounir Neamatallah, nestles in a lush palm grove about 300m from the main square. The palms are a feature of the building wherever possible and the seven large, extremely comfortable rooms have lots of curving mud-brick goodness, massive exposed-brick bathrooms and lie arranged courtyard-style around a

small pool. Tasteful and quiet, this is how small hotels should be. Breakfast not included.

Al-Babinshal (Map p358; ☎ 460 1499; s/d US\$45/60) Literally attached to the fortress of Shali, this place continues the ecolodge footprint left by Shali Lodge – and Adrère Amellal – owner Mounir Neamatallah. The cunning architects have seamlessly grafted this mud-brick hotel onto the front of Shali fort, and a maze of tunnels and stairways connects the spacious and cool cave-like rooms, making it impossible to tell where the hotel ends and the fort begins. Entirely made from the same materials as the original fort, each intimate abode has wood-floor panelling, traditional wooden-shuttered windows and exposed palm-log supports. Some locals, however, are not convinced that this augmentation of their town's landmark is necessarily for the better.

SIDI JAAFAR

Taziry Ecolodge (off Map p357; ☎ 02-3337 0842, ext 115, 012 340 8492; Gaary; low season per person full board from €70; 🍴) This lovely hotel was designed and built by its friendly owners, an artist and an engineer, both from Alexandria. The large natural-material rooms are decorated with local crafts and Bedouin rugs, and have their own bathroom. Tranquil and laid-back, with no electricity and a natural spring pool overlooking the lake, it is a great place to unwind and experience Siwa's magic.

our pick **Adrère Amellal** (off Map p357; ☎ in Cairo 02-736 7879, 02-738 1327; www.adreeramellal.net; Sidi Jaafar, White Mountain; s/d incl all meals, drinks & desert excursions US\$336/448; 🍴) Backed by the dramatic White Mountain (called Adrère Amellal in Siwi), this impeccable desert retreat lies coddled in

its own oasis, with stunning views over the salt lake of Birket Siwa and the dunes of the Great Sand Sea beyond. It is a truly unique place, built by environmentalist Mounir Neamatallah out of *kershef*, and using revived traditional building techniques. It's a real getaway from the regular pace of Egyptian life: mobile phones are banned outside the rooms and there is no electricity, with the gardens lit by torches and the rooms by candlelight. It offers the ultimate in spartan chic, as gourmet dinners are eaten under the stars or in salt-encrusted chambers. The swimming pool is an ancient stone natural spring and the rooms and suites are palatial, yet simple and beautiful. Together with inventive food that uses produce from its own organic garden and the feel-good factor of environmentally sound luxury, Adrère Amellal has featured in countless travel and style magazines and is one of the most innovative places to stay in the country.

GEBEL DAKRUR

Qasr az-Zaytouna (Map p357; ☎ /fax 460 0037; d without bathroom ££100, s/d ££120/150) This place has simple, clean rooms with fans, set in a large, hushed garden. The rooms on the 1st floor have pleasant views over the garden. It's run by a German–Siwan couple.

Fata Morgana Hotel (Map p357; ☎ 460 0237, 010 294 5850; s/d ££150/200; 🍴) The Fata Morgana has several cool and spacious rooms, jazzed up by tall, domed ceilings and curving arches. The two-storey, stonework building here stays amazingly chilled in the desert heat, and the small, clear pool will help you cool down if you're still breaking a sweat. Each chamber

SAND BATHING

If you thought a soak in a hot spring was invigorating, wait until you try a dip in one of the scalding-hot sand baths of **Gebel Dakrur** mountain, several kilometres southeast of Siwa Town. From July to September, people flock here from all over the world to take turns being immersed up to their necks in a bath of very hot sand for up to 20 minutes at a time. Local doctors claim that a treatment regime of three to five days can cure rheumatism and arthritis – and judging by the number of repeat customers they get they might just be onto something. There are several places around the western slope of the mountain where you can get therapeutically sand-dunked; **Sherif sand bath** (Map p357) has a good reputation. Expect to pay around ££60 for each medicinal dip, which includes several necessary hours of recovery while sipping tea (though the tea is optional).

The mountain also supplies the oasis with the reddish-brown pigment used to decorate Siwan pottery. Siwans believe that the mountain is haunted and claim that *afrit* (spirits) can be heard singing in the gardens at night.

has a balcony with great views of either Gebel Dakrur mountain or the desert expanse – top marks in the bang-for-buck department.

Siwa Shali Resort (Map p357; ☎ 010 111 9730; www.siwashaliresort.com; s/d half board US\$55/65, ste US\$100; 🍷 🍷) One of the few places in the deserts that earns its 'resort' label, this self-contained village of traditionally styled bungalows snakes its way along a 500m spring-fed pool. Nearly everything here is sand-coloured and subdued, almost to the point of being dull, but it offers all the mod cons, a restaurant, fitness facilities, a Bedouin-style café and gift shops.

Tala Ranch Hotel (Map p357; ☎ 010 588 6003; www.talaranch-hotel.com; per person with breakfast E£450) This newcomer offers a very different experience of Siwa, with six stylish and comfortable rooms on the edge of the desert. It promises generous helpings of hush and is as relaxing as things get, with the camels, the desert and the wind as the only distractions. Sherif can organise camel trips or safaris for guests, while his wife, Siham, prepares commendable Egyptian food served in a Bedouin tent (four-course dinner E£80).

Eating

Many of the restaurants and cafés in Siwa cater to tourists. With the exception of the delicious restaurant at the Adrère Amellal, and the home-cooked food at places such as Taziry and Talaa Ranch, which is for guests only, most restaurants offer a similar menu of simple dishes, and the service and quality can vary from day to day.

East-West Restaurant (Map p358; dishes E£4-12) Named after the historical divide between the two parts of Siwa Town, this restaurant serves a cheaper, more pedestrian version of Abdu's menu and has lethargic service.

Alexander Restaurant (Map p358; off central market sq; dishes E£5-15) Alexander serves the usual budget-restaurant fare, with pizzas, veggie stews, very good chicken and, innovatively for Siwa, curries. Service can be slow here too, but the food usually arrives with a smile.

Nour al-Waha (Map p358; ☎ 460 0293; Sharia Subukha; dishes E£5-20) A popular hang-out in a palm grove opposite Shali Lodge, Nour al-Waha has shady tables, and plenty of tea and games on hand for those who just want to while away the day in the shade. The food is a mixture of Egyptian and Western and while it couldn't be called gourmet, it is generally fresh and

good. At night *sheeshas* are available for E£5, and sometimes there is live music.

Abdu's Restaurant (Map p358; ☎ 460 1243; central market sq; dishes E£5-25; 🍷 8.30am-midnight) Before internet and mobile phones, there were places like Abdu's – a village hub where people gathered nightly to meet, catch up and swap stories. This is the longest-running restaurant in town and remains the best eating option around, with a huge menu of breakfast, pasta, traditional dishes, vegetable stews, couscous, roasted chickens and fantastic pizza whipped to your table by the efficient service.

Tanta Waa Coffeshop & Restaurant (Map p357; ☎ 010 472 9539; meals E£7-25; 🍷 8am-late) This super-chilled and creatively clad mud-brick café at Cleopatra's Bath is the perfect place for a cool drink or tasty meal in between splashes in the spring. The food here is surprisingly good, with a small selection of salads, pastas, meat dishes and fruit smoothies. The lasagne alone, which follows a genuine Italian recipe, is worth the trip out here (E£12). Slung with hammocks and with a background of funky tunes (it also occasionally holds evening parties), it's easy to while away an entire day at this haven.

Dunes Restaurant (Map p358; ☎ 010 653 0372; Sharia Torrar; dishes E£8-25) With tables set under the palm trees and a large menu covering everything from herbal tea to couscous, Dunes is just another place to hang out and relax. The usual traveller stalwarts (from pancakes to smoothies) can be found here, as well as local specialities such as stuffed pigeon (by special order). *Sheeshas* are *de rigueur* and the owner can arrange special evenings with traditional Siwan music.

Al-Babinshal Restaurant (Map p358; ☎ 460 1499; meals E£8-35) On the roof of the hotel of the same name, this might just be the most romantic dining spot found in the oases. Moodily lit in the evenings, it's practically attached to the fortress of Shali and has sweeping views over all of Siwa. The food is prepared by the same chef as at Kenooz Siwa (below), but unfortunately Al-Babinshal Restaurant does not quite live up to the promise of its chic ambience.

Kenooz Siwa (Map p358; ☎ 460 1299; Sharia Subukha; dishes E£8-35) This café-restaurant on the roof terrace of the Shali Lodge is a great place to hang out with a mint tea or a cold drink, although the quality of the food, once the best in town, has definitely deteriorated of late.

GAY SIWA?

Much attention has been paid to Siwa's unique history of intimate male relations. Back when Siwa's citizens still lived in Shali fort, young men between the ages of 20 and 40 were expected to spend their nights outside the fortress to tend to the fields and protect the town from attack. These men of Siwa had a notorious reputation, not only for their bravery (they were known as *zaggalah*, or 'club bearers'), but for their love of palm wine, music and openly gay relations. Single-sex marriages were still practised in Siwa right up until WWII, although they had been outlawed in Egypt decades earlier.

Even though Siwa has been listed as a place to visit in several gay travel directories, the situation today is quite different. Residents of Siwa vehemently deny that local gay men exist in their town, and international travellers coming to Siwa in hope of 'hooking up' have been faced with increasingly homophobic sentiment. Siwan men are not amused at being propositioned by passing strangers – they are much more likely than foreigners to bear the brunt of antigay attitudes. Violent attacks on local men accused of homosexuality are not unheard of.

There are several other cosy palm-garden restaurants around Siwa serving the usual combination of Egyptian and Western fare, including:

Sahara Café & Restaurant (Map p357; ☎ 010 856 9532; meals E£7-20) A nice place to chill, if you can find someone to serve you.

New Star Restaurant & Coffee Shop (Map p358; ☎ 460 0293; Sharia Subukha; dishes E£8-30) Also has a small shop selling traditional crafts.

Drinking

Many of the cafés around town are no-name places where Siwan men gather to watch TV and chat, but no alcohol is served. The cafeteria at Fatnas Spring (p360) sometimes has beer.

Campione Cafe (Map p358; ☎ 460 1719; coffee E£3-6; ☎ 9am-midnight) Recently opened by an enterprising Alexandrian, we can't argue with its slogan: 'life is too short for bad coffee'. It serves imported Italian coffee made with a bona-fide imported espresso machine and prepared any way you like it. Latte anyone?

Dreamers (Map p358; opposite Arous al-Waha Hotel) Lively café open late where you can smoke a *sheesha* on an old-fashioned sofa while watching TV with locals, or drink a juice listening to reggae music.

Taghaghien Touristic Island (off Map p357; ☎ 921 0060; admission E£10) If you're desperate for a beer, this small island 12km northwest of Siwa Town and connected by a causeway is one of the few places selling the amber nectar (for a whopping E£25 a bottle). There is some humble accommodation and a restaurant here, but its many shaded tables and chairs, paddleboat rentals and sweet sunset vistas make it better

suited for a day trip or picnic. You'll need your own transport to get here.

Right in town, **Zeytouna** (Map p358; central market sq) and **Ebad Alrahman** (Map p358; central market sq) are two cafés facing each other at opposite ends of the square and taking turns nightly to fill up with locals smoking *sheesha*, downing tea and slapping backgammon pieces with triumphant vigour. Their tables often spill out onto the town square.

Shopping

Siwa's rich culture is well represented by the abundance of traditional crafts that are still made for local use as well as for tourists. Unfortunately, an estimated 98% of the older artefacts have become collectors' items and been sold to collectors worldwide. These pieces of Siwan heritage may be lost, but young Siwan craftsmen are slowly starting to make the pieces again.

Siwans love to adorn themselves and they are second only to the Nubians in their quest for the biggest and most ornate pieces of jewellery to be found in Egypt. Siwan women only wear the heavy silver jewellery on special occasions these days, but several interesting pieces are still made. Siwan wedding dresses are famous for their red, orange, green and black embroidery, which is often embellished with shells and beads. The black silk *asherah nazitaf* and the white cotton *asherah namilal* dresses can be found at the shops.

Baskets woven from date-palm fronds are still made here by women and girls. You can spot old baskets by their finer workmanship and the use of silk or leather instead of vinyl

and polyester. The *tarkamt*, a woven plate that features a red leather centre, is traditionally used for serving sweets, the larger *tghara* is used for storing bread, and smaller baskets include the *aqarush* and the red-and-green silk-tasselled *nedibash*.

Local clays are mixed with straw and coloured with pigment from Gebel Dakrur to make pottery water jugs, drinking cups and incense burners. The *maklay*, a round-bottomed cup, and the *adjra*, used for washing hands, are among the most popular buys, as are *timjamait* (incense burners).

There has been an explosion of craft shops around Siwa Town in recent years catering to the lucrative tourist demand for this traditional handiwork. Most sell very similar items, but a good place to get an idea of prices and what's available is at the **Government Handcraft Shop** (Map p358; opposite mosque; ☎ 9am-4pm Sun-Thu). If you blink, however, you might miss its erratic opening hours. From there you can wander through the many other handicrafts shops and stalls in town to compare the quality of the craftsmanship, the range of what's available and prices. Happy haggling.

One of the better handicrafts shops in Siwa, run by Ali Abd Allah, is the **Siwa Traditional Handicraft** (Map p358; ☎ 460 1063, 010 304 1191), around the corner on the main market square. He sells a wide range of quality merchandise at fixed prices.

Siwa is also known for its dates and olives, available in shops around the main market square. Usually someone will open a jar so you can try the olives to find the variety you like. Everyone has a favourite brand of dates; Jawhara are particularly good.

Camera film and batteries can be bought at Nada Studio Lab (Map p358), just past the telephone centrale on the main road out of Siwa Town.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Buses depart from the bus stop opposite the tourist police station, although when you arrive you'll be let off the bus in the central market square. You can purchase tickets to Marsa Matruh or Alexandria at the West Delta Bus Company ticket office at the bus stop. It's sensible to buy your ticket ahead of time as buses are often full.

There are three daily buses to Alexandria (E£27 to E£30, eight hours), stopping at Marsa

Matruh (E£12, four hours). These leave at 7am, 10am and 10pm. There's an extra daily bus leaving at 3pm in the winter and 5pm in the summer. The 7am and 10am buses also connect with buses to Cairo at Marsa Matruh (1½-hour transit, if you're lucky). There's a daily service to Marsa Matruh only at 1pm.

Microbuses going to Marsa Matruh leave from the main square near the King Fuad Mosque (Map p358). They are more frequent but not as comfortable as the West Delta Bus. Tickets cost the same.

SERVICE TAXI

There is no service-taxi station, but those making the trip to Marsa Matruh (E£12) leave from the area in front of Abdu's Restaurant (p364). The taxis (mostly minibuses) tend to leave in the early morning or after sunset, but ask around to confirm this.

A new road linking the oases of Siwa and Bahariya began construction in 2005, but funds dried up the following year and any finishing date is now a distant mirage. The old road, which passes through some jaw-dropping desert landscapes, is asphalted, though you can't tell by the awful shape it's in, and a permit (see p357) is needed to drive along it. In winter a police escort on this route is also usually required. There are no buses or service taxis here, but Siwan drivers are willing to make the 10-hour trip for about E£800 to E£1500 per car. If you do go, ensure that the vehicle is a roadworthy 4WD and that you have food and water.

TO/FROM LIBYA

Siwans visit their families in Libya and vice versa, but at the time of writing it is still illegal to cross into Libya and go on to the town of Jaghbug, about 120km away, unless you travel via Sallum (see p405). Although the border is only 50km away it is reportedly mined, so things are unlikely to change soon.

Getting Around

BICYCLE

Bicycles are one of the best ways to get around and can be rented from several sources, including most hotels and a number of shops dotted around the town centre. Getting a bike from one of the bicycle repair shops (see Map p358) gives you a better chance of finding a bike in good condition. The going rate is E£10 per day.

DONKEY CART

Donkey carts, or *caretas*, are a much-used mode of transport for Siwans and can be a more amusing, if slower, way to get around than bicycles or cars. Some of the boys who drive the carts speak English and can be fierce hagglers. Expect to pay about £25 for two to three hours or £5 for a short trip.

MOTORCYCLE

Though not as enjoyable or tranquil as bicycles, motorbikes can also be rented from enterprising locals and can help you visit a lot more sights if you are short on time. Ahmed, who works at a handicrafts store near the petrol station, arranges **motorbike rental** (☎ 016 203 5959), as does Palm Trees Hotel (p362). Expect to pay around £100 per day.

SERVICE TAXI

Pick-up trucks serve as communal taxis linking Siwa Town with the surrounding villages. To get to Bilad ar-Rum costs £1 each way; closer destinations are 50pt. If you want to get to more remote sites, Mahdi Hweiti at the tourist office or any of the restaurants will be able to help. Prices depend on haggling skills, the duration of the trip and the distance to be covered.

BEYOND SIWA**Qara Oasis**

About 120km northeast of Siwa, near the Qattara Depression, is another oasis, Qara. This remote oasis is home to 317 Berbers who, like the Siwans, built their fortresslike town on top of a mountain. According to legend, the harsh environment and scarce resources in the area meant that whenever a child was born in Qara an older person would have to leave in order to keep the population at a sustainable level. Whether or not this was ever true, it is no longer practised, although the Qarans remain small in number and their life is harsh. Unlike in Siwa, the old fortress is still inhabited, but an increasing number of new concrete houses are being built down below.

To get there, take the narrow asphalt road that branches off the Siwa–Marsa Matruh road at the rest house, 150km from Siwa. You can either rent a pick-up to take you there for about £400 or talk to the many people in town offering desert safaris. For more information, see p361.

Great Sand Sea

One of the world's largest dune fields, the Great Sand Sea straddles Egypt and Libya, stretching over 800km south to the Gilf Kebir. There are 18 sand seas around the world, four of them in North Africa. The Great Sand Sea begins south of the Mediterranean coast. A branch splits off in Libya, south of Siwa, forming the Calanscio Sand Sea; the rest carries on southeast within Egypt. Sitting on a rise in the desert floor and covering a colossal 72,000 sq km, it contains some of the largest recorded dunes in the world, including one that is 140km long. Crescent, *seif* (sword) and parallel wavy dunes are found here (see boxed text, p347), some of which are on the move while others remain in place. Undulating and beautiful, the dunes are treacherous and have challenged desert travellers for hundreds of years. The Persian king Cambyses is thought to have lost an army here (see boxed text, p346), while the WWII British Long Range Desert Group spent months trying to find a way through the impenetrable sands to launch surprise attacks on the German army. Aerial surveys and expeditions have helped the charting of this vast expanse, but it remains one of the least-explored areas on earth.

The Great Sand Sea is not a place to go wandering on a whim, and you will need military permits as well as good preparation. Guides will take you to the edges of the Great Sand Sea from Siwa and many safari outfits will take you on expeditions that skirt the area (see p329). Remember that you don't need to penetrate far into the desert in order to feel the isolation, beauty and enormous scale of this amazing landscape.

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