

SINAI (EGYPT)

سيناء



Wedged between Africa and Asia, Sinai is a region of stark beauty. Red-brown mountains fill the southern interior, surrounded by relentlessly dry desert plains that metamorphose into many-hued panoramas under the rays of the morning and evening sun. Most visitors head to the wonderfully laid-back resorts on the Red Sea coast, with their white-sand beaches fringed with teeming coral reefs.

Sinai's stunning desert and marine environment offers so much more than lazy days on the beach. The region has some of the most spectacular diving in the world but it isn't even necessary to don expensive scuba gear to appreciate the underwater life; a face mask and snorkel will do. Other highlights include adventurous desert hikes, camel safaris, close-up encounters with traditional Bedouin culture and following pilgrims' roads to biblical sites such as St Katherine's Monastery, one of the oldest surviving churches in the world.

Between 1967 and 1982 the arid Sinai peninsula was occupied by Israeli forces but they were obliged to withdraw under the terms of the Camp David Agreement. In recent years Sinai has become the focus of much development and 'reconstruction', and tourism has brought great changes. The small villages of Dahab and Nuweiba have grown into sprawling beach-front tourist towns, and there is little of the coastline left without at least the beginnings of hotel construction. The Bedouin, the traditional inhabitants of Sinai, are now a minority in their native land. Marginalised by Cairo-based tour operators and a suspicious and aggressive police force, they have little means to resist all this change.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Climbing the 3750 Steps of Repentance to greet the dawn from the summit of **Mt Sinai** (p382)
- Splashing out on a **dive safari** (p377) from Dahab or Nuweiba for glorious diving days and desert nights
- Enjoying the simple life at one of the **rustic camps** (opposite) between Taba and Nuweiba
- Coming face to face with the incredible Red Sea marine life – some of the most exotic in the world – by stepping off the beach at **Wadi Gnai** (p381)
- Wasting away the day with an apple *sheesha* and a book at one of Dahab's **beach-side cafés** (p381)



FAST FACTS ON EGYPT

Capital Cairo
Country code ☎ 20
Sinai code ☎ 069
Language Arabic
Money Egyptian pound (E£), consisting 100 piastres (pt); US\$1 = E£5.72, €1 = E£7.20
Visas If you are entering Sinai from Israel and only intend to visit the eastern coastal resorts from Taba down to Sharm el-Sheikh, no Egyptian visa is required – you will just need a 14-day pass, which is issued at the border. For details, see p404.

Getting There & Away

If you're travelling overland to or from Israel, there are two border crossing points, Taba and Rafah. However, Taba is the only one open to foreign travellers. For details on Taba itself, see p374; for border crossing details, see p404.

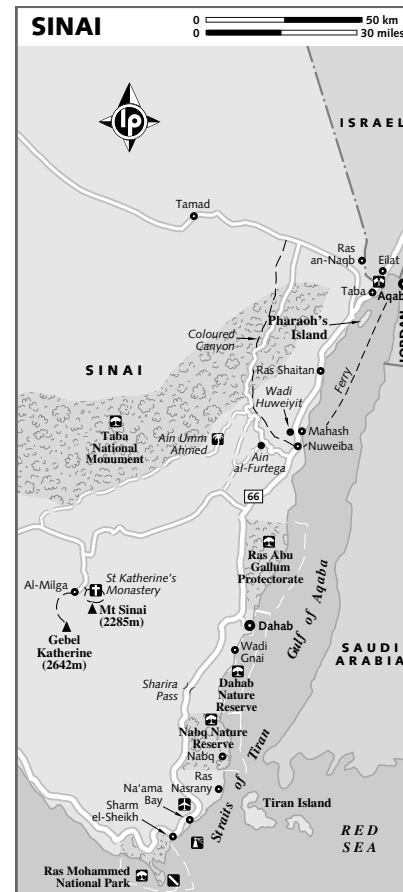
There is also a fast ferry link between Nuweiba on the Sinai coast and Aqaba in Jordan. For details, see p405.

Getting Around

East Delta Bus Co runs several bus services from Taba. The 10am bus goes down the coast to Nuweiba (E£12, one hour), then inland to St Katherine's Monastery (E£25, four hours). Buses travel to Cairo (E£55 to E£60, six to seven hours) at 10.30am, 12.30pm and 4.30pm. For Sharm el-Sheikh (E£35, 3½ hours) there are buses at 9am and 3pm,

WARNING

The overwhelming majority of travellers to Sinai enjoy their visits without incident. However, because of the peninsula's unique position between cultures and continents, its occasionally tumultuous history, its mountainous terrain and – in more recent times – its masses of tourists, Sinai has traditionally had a higher security profile than other parts of the country. Before making your travel plans, it's worth checking your embassy's travel advisory to get an update on the situation. When travelling in the interior carry your passport at all times and be mindful that some roads are closed to foreigners. Road signs to this effect should be heeded.



stopping at Nuweiba (E£10, one hour) and Dahab (E£21, 2½ hours). To Nuweiba only, there's another bus at 2pm.

Peugeot taxis and minibuses function as service taxis but are really expensive. You're much better off getting the bus. To Nuweiba they charge E£50 per person, to Dahab E£70, to Sharm el-Sheikh E£120 and to Cairo E£100 to E£120.

TABA TO NUWEIBA

The stunning coastline between Nuweiba and Taba is fringed with aqua-blue waters and rimmed by chains of low, barren mountains. While there are a few pristine spots left, much of it is lined by a string of 'tourist villages' in various stages of completion,

interspersed with simple beach camps consisting of reed huts, an eating area and a very mellow ambience.

While tourism is suffering greatly in Nuweiba and Dahab due to the political turns of recent years, this strip of coast continues to attract travellers, particularly adventurous young Israelis who ignore government warnings and venture here for some precious fun in the sun.

Unless otherwise noted, all the camps charge between E£10 and E£20 per person for a very basic hut with mattresses on the floor and shared facilities. The only way to reach the camps is by service taxi or bus. Buses (see Getting Around, p373) will drop you at any of the places, although you'll probably have to pay the full Taba–Nuweiba fare (E£12).

Taba

طابا
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This busy border crossing between Egypt and Israel is open 24 hours. There's a small post and telephone office opposite the New Taba Beach Resort in the 'town', along with a few shops. You can change money at the 24-hour Banque Misr booth in the arrivals hall, and there's an ATM just outside the border. The Taba Hilton will usually change travellers cheques, and you can also change money at the small exchange booth in the customs and passport control building, or at one of the moneychangers down by the bus stand. When you exit the arrivals hall, the bus station is a 10-minute walk straight ahead on the left-hand side of the road.

For information on getting to/from the border see p404.

Ras Shaitan

رأس الشيطان
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This rocky point (its name translates as Satan's Head) jutting into the gulf 3km north of Maagana Beach came tragically into the world spotlight in 2004 when it was targeted as part of the series of terrorist bombings that hit the Taba Hilton. Since then the pace of life has returned to normal, and it's one of the most popular beach areas on the Taba–Nuweiba strip.

Easily one of the most popular camps on the whole of the peninsula, **Ayyash Camp** (☎ 012 760 4668, 010 525 9109; www.ras-satan.com; huts per person E£20) attracts musicians from

around the region (both Arab and Israeli) who come to jam on the beach or in the small recording studio. Owned by a local Bedouin, it's in a beautiful setting on a wide stretch of sand and has a special atmosphere – the sort of place where people come for a holiday and never leave. Each hut has its own shaded balcony with shared facilities and no electricity.

Most taxi drivers will try and drop you off at **Castle Beach** (☎ 012 739 8495; d E£80; ☎), a pleasant place just north of Ayyash Camp near the *ras* (headland). It's one of the few midrange camps – accommodation is in comfortable bungalows, and there's a beachside restaurant. Camel and jeep treks can be organised for a minimum of four people.

Mahash

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Continuing south, the next cluster of camps is in the Mahash area, about 20km north of Nuweiba on an attractive stretch of beach.

Basata (☎ 350 0480/1; www.basata.com; camp sites per person US\$7, huts per person US\$12, 3-person chalet US\$58) means 'simplicity' in Arabic and this clean, ecologically minded settlement reflects its name with organically grown produce and recycling for rubbish. There are simple huts sharing facilities, pleasant chalets with electricity and private bathroom, a large camping area, a kitchen and bakery. The ambience is very laid-back and family friendly with a New Age twist.

Rock Sea Camp (☎ 012 796 3199; www.rocksea.net; huts from US\$12) is a peaceful camp run by an easy-going German family on a lovely curve of beach north of Nuweiba. The 20 straw huts and wooden bungalows are attractively fitted out and not right on top of each other. The restaurant has a diverse menu and a great position so close to the water you can actually see the fish darting through the reef.

NUWEIBA

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Turquoise waters edged by fine, sandy beaches and barren, rugged mountain chains on both sides give Nuweiba one of the most attractive settings among Sinai's resort towns. However, its centre-less layout (stretched randomly over about 15km), its lack of ambience and its comparatively low-key diving scene mean that it has never managed to attract the cult following of nearby Dahab.

Nuweiba has been badly hit by the lack of Israeli tourists since the outbreak of the second intifada and the spate of recent bombings in the Sinai. It is very, very quiet these days, although the Tarabin area continues to attract a trickle of visitors. However, this lack of crowds gives Nuweiba its own appeal, and it makes a reasonable stop if you're working your way up or down the coast.

Orientation

Nuweiba is divided into three parts. To the south is the port, with a bus station, banks and a couple of scruffy hotels. About 8km further north is Nuweiba City, a small but spread-out settlement with a variety of accommodation options, a small bazaar and several cheap places to eat. About a 10-minute walk north along the beach is Tarabin, with an unbroken stretch of bamboo-and-concrete huts lining the shoreline.

Information

EMERGENCY

Tourist police Nuweiba City (☎ 350 0231; near Nuweiba Village hotel); Nuweiba Port (☎ 350 0401)

INTERNET ACCESS

Al-Mostakbal Internet Café (☎ 350 0090; Nuweiba City; per hr E£6; ☎ 9am–3am)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Nuweiba Hospital (☎ 350 0302; Nuweiba City) Just off the main highway to Dahab, and to be avoided except in dire emergencies.

MONEY

Neither of the banks at the port will handle Jordanian dinars.

National Bank of Egypt Nuweiba Port (☎ 8.30am–2pm Sun–Thu); Nuweiba Village (☎ 9am–1pm & 7–9pm Sat–Thu, 9–11am Fri) Both branches have an ATM.

POST

Main post office (Nuweiba City; ☎ 8.30am–2.30pm Sun–Thu)

TELEPHONE

Telephone centrale (Nuweiba City; ☎ 24hr)

Activities

WATER SPORTS

Underwater delights are the feature attraction, and while not as dramatic as those at other resorts on the Gulf of Aqaba, the

dive sites tend to be less crowded, with an impressive variety of marine life. The best snorkelling is at the Abou Lou Lou House Reef just south of town (it's just off the jetty, which is on the private beach used by the hotels in Nuweiba City south of Tarabin). Divers sometimes head to Ras Abu Gallum Protectorate (p377) or other offshore destinations – many of which are also fine for snorkellers – though most diving here is shore-based. Check at local dive clubs for further information about sites and excursions, such as **Emperor Divers** (☎ 352 0695; www.emperordivers.com; Hilton Nuweiba Coral Resort), which offers full-day diving for €45 and open-water diving with a PADI certificate for €295.

The **Hilton Nuweiba Coral Resort** (☎ 352 0320) has the best selection of water-sport equipment, including kayaks.

CAMEL & JEEP TREKS

Nuweiba is one of the best places in Sinai to arrange camel and jeep safaris into the dramatic mountains lining the coast. One of the most popular is the trip to Coloured Canyon, between St Katherine's and Nuweiba. The canyon derives its name from the layers of bright, multicoloured stones that resemble paintings on its steep, narrow walls, and is magnificently beautiful, although unfortunately it has become very overvisited in recent years. The canyon is about 5km off the main road; 4WDs can be driven to within 100m of it.

Another popular destination is Ain al-Furtega, a palm-filled oasis 16km northwest of Nuweiba, and easily accessible by regular car. Mayat el-Wishwashi is a large cistern hidden between two boulders in a canyon. It used to be the largest cistern in Sinai, but now has only a trickle of water, except after floods. Nearby is Mayat Malkha, a palm grove fed by the waters of Mayat el-Wishwashi and set amid colourful sandstone, accessible by camel or on foot only. Wadi Huweiyit is an impressive sandstone canyon with lookouts giving panoramic views over to Saudi Arabia. It is accessible by 4WD and camel. Ain Hudra (Green Spring) is where it is believed Miriam was struck by leprosy for criticising Moses. Famously beautiful, it is an easy day trip by 4WD, or a longer trip by camel. The picturesque Ain Umm Ahmed is the largest oasis in eastern Sinai, with lots of palms, Bedouin

houses and a stream that becomes an icy river in the winter months. It can be visited by camel or 4WD.

Basata is a good place to find a reliable Bedouin guide. The efficient **Abanoub Travel** (☎ 352 0201; abanoubt@menanet.net; Mizena) uses local Bedouin and offers camel treks for about US\$4 per day, including food. Jeep treks can also be arranged.

Sleeping

The hotels near the port are poor value and not recommended. It's better to head up to the camps of Tarabin or the hotels of Nuweiba City.

NUWEIBA CITY

The best way to reach some of these listings is to jump in a taxi as the city is very spread out.

Amon-Yahro Camp (☎ 350 0555; www.amonyahro.net; per person E£20) A good, simple camp with huts, on raised concrete platforms, overlooking the beach. All have electricity and bathrooms, and there's a restaurant.

Fayrouza Village (☎ 350 1133; fayrouza@sinaï4you.com; s/d US\$10/14) This comfortable place is well located on the beach at the edge of Nuweiba City and in front of a reef. It has simple but spotless huts, all with fan, electricity, window screens and good beds. The shared bathrooms have hot water, and the restaurant serves up filling, tasty meals. They can also help you organise reasonably priced camel and jeep safaris to surrounding attractions. If you're arriving in Nuweiba by bus, ask them to drop you at the hospital, from where it's a 10-minute walk down to Fayrouza (walk towards the beach and it's the second street on your left).

Habiba Village (☎ 350 0770; www.sinaï4you.com/habiba; huts US\$21, with private bathroom & air-con US\$65) This small hotel has a selection of double huts, overpriced air-con rooms and a beachfront restaurant. If you're after quiet, it may not be the best choice as many of the rooms are near the restaurant area.

TARABIN

New Soft Beach Camp (☎ 010 364 7586; www.softbeachcamp.com; s/d E£15/20; ☎) This camp has one of the best settings, at the quieter end of Tarabin near the dunes. It has the usual simple huts, communal outdoor showers

that are generally reliable (except when the garden is being watered) and a decent restaurant.

Moonland Camp (☎ 350 1229; 2- to 3-person huts E£10) Another decent choice, though the compound is somewhat closed in and set back from the beach. Accommodation is in a collection of huts, all with fan, and there's hot water in the communal showers. It's a few minutes' walk north of Soft Beach at the southern end of Tarabin.

Saraya Beach Resort (☎ 350 1230; huts per person with/without air-con E£20/15, 4-person r with bathroom & air-con E£150; ☎) A popular and well-run place with a choice of double or triple huts, or a block of rooms. It's north of Moonland in the heart of Tarabin.

Eating

Most people tend to eat at their camp but in Nuweiba City you have a choice of several small eateries, including **Dr Shishkebab** (☎ 350 0273; Bazaar, Nuweiba City; dishes E£10-50; ☎ 7am-11pm), which offers a generous spread of ta'amiyya, salad, fried aubergine and hummus with all meals; the *daood basha* (meatballs in a rich tomato sauce) and rice is particularly tasty. Although famous for meat dishes, it also serves cheap vegetarian meals and breakfasts.

For something different check out the surprisingly good Chinese and Korean fare at **Han Kang** (☎ 350 0970; Nuweiba City; dishes E£20-50), a small, spotless restaurant, just down from and on the opposite side of the street from Nuweiba Village hotel.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

There is a ferry service to Aqaba in Jordan. Schedules and prices vary so it is always better to stop in at the ticket office at the harbour in Nuweiba a day or so before you want to leave. See p405 for details.

BUS

East Delta Bus Co (☎ 352 0371; Nuweiba Port) has buses to Cairo (E£55, seven to eight hours) leaving at 9am, 11am and 3pm and going via Taba (E£12, one hour); and to Sharm el-Sheikh (E£21, three hours) via Dahab (E£11, one hour) at 6.30am, 8.30am, 10am and 4pm. There is an inconvenient connection from Nuweiba to St Katherine's Monastery via Dahab departing at 8.30am (E£21).

DESERT DWELLING

Trekking through the desert or a going on a 'dive safari' to the beautiful Ras Abu Gallum are definite highlights of a trip to the Sinai. But when choosing who to go with, we recommend trying to find a Bedouin – or at least someone who works with a Bedouin – because many Bedouins are excluded from the tourist industry, which tends to be dominated by migrants from the Nile Valley.

Centre for Sinai (☎ 364 0702; www.centre4sinaï.com.eg) is one outfit that tries to promote knowledge of the local culture as well as showing visitors the sights, and its website is a good place to look for guides. **Man & the Environment Dahab** (MATE; ☎ 069-364 1091; www.mate-dahab.com) is an environmental education centre that helps arrange treks with Bedouin guides. In Dahab **Nesima Dive Centre** (☎ 069-364 0320; Nesima Resort, Mashraba) uses local guides for its excursions, and **Desert Divers** (☎ 069-364 0500; www.desert-divers.com) is owned by Said, the first Bedouin in Dahab to learn to dive.

If you are after a base for immersing yourself in the beauty of the Southern Sinai then try the Bedouin-owned **Al-Karm Ecolodge** (☎ 069-347 0032; www.stkpark.gov.eg; Sheikh Awaad; camping/r per person E£25/75), in a remote wadi near the small settlement of Sheikh Awaad. It offers simple rooms, solar-heated shared showers, a kitchen and tranquility; bring your own bedding. To get here, follow the track from Tarfa village, which is about 20km from St Katherine's on Wadi Feiran road. If you aren't with a local, call the **St Katherine's Protectorate** (☎ 069-347 0032/33) for directions, and it can arrange for someone to meet you. Once at the lodge, the local Bedouin can help you arrange hiking and camel treks.

RAS ABU GALLUM PROTECTORATE

راس أبو جلولم

The starkly beautiful Ras Abu Gallum Protectorate covers 400 sq km of coastline between Dahab and Nuweiba, mixing high coastal mountains, narrow valleys, sand dunes and fine gravel beaches with several excellent diving and snorkelling sites.

There is a designated camping area and several walking trails in the protectorate and you can hire Bedouin guides and camels through the ranger house at the edge of Wadi Rasasah. While still beautiful, the area has become an extremely popular destination, overflowing at times with day trippers from Sharm el-Sheikh and Dahab. Local Bedouin have caught on, and have even started charging visitors to use the very basic toilet facilities.

The most popular destinations within the protectorate include Bir el-Oghda, a now-deserted Bedouin village, and Bir Sugheir, a water source at the edge of the protectorate.

Dive centres and travel agencies in Nuweiba and Dahab offer camel and jeep excursions to Abu Gallum, often as part of a diving safari. The protectorate can also be reached by hiking in from north of the Blue Hole near Dahab.

DAHAB

داهب
☎ 069

With its golden beaches, rugged mountain backdrop and smooth fusion of hippie mellowness and resort chic, Dahab has become one of Sinai's most popular coastal destinations. Unlike most of Egypt's other resorts, it's also a place where independent travellers are still the rule rather than the exception, and it offers a wide array of accommodation and diversions catering to all tastes and budgets.

Dahab (the name means 'gold' in Arabic, after the area's sandy coastline) long had a reputation as being the Koh Samui of the Middle East. But in recent years it has grown up and while the banana pancakes remain, they now coexist with internet cafés, Italian restaurants and upscale hotels. The once chilled-out beach-front area is now lined by a paved path, and you're just as likely to see New Age families strolling along as hardcore overland travellers.

Orientation

There are two parts to Dahab: the small and newer area of Dahab City, with a smattering of resort hotels and the bus station; and Assalah, which is north along the beach, and was originally a Bedouin village. Assalah is divided into Masbat and Mashraba.

end of Dahab Bay, although the wind tends to be gusty here. Kitesurfing is also starting to take off in Dahab, although offshore winds limit the areas where it can be done. Check out the internet for more information as lots of European companies run courses.

HORSE RIDING

If you want to go riding, just wait on the beach in Mashraba for one of the Bedouin who walk up and down with horses for hire. Rates start at about E£20 per hour. You can also ask around the camps. **Blue Beach Club** (☎ 364 0411; www.bluebeachclub.com; Assalah) can arrange horses for E£80 per hour.

Sleeping BUDGET

If you're looking at accommodation before you arrive, check out www.dahab.net, an excellent commission-free online booking service with a good selection of hotels and activities.

Penguin Village (☎ 364 1047; www.penguindivers.com; Mashraba; dm/s/d E£10/24/30, with private bathroom E£40/60, with air-con E£50/80; ☺ ☑) This agreeable place offers some of the best-value accommodation in Dahab. Sitting behind a cluster of palms in a relatively quiet setting on the waterfront in Mashraba, it has a whitewashed block of simple, clean rooms and knowledgeable staff who can help you organise jeep and camel safaris. The beach restaurant is an especially pleasant place to sit and read a book for a couple of hours, or you could organise a dive through the popular dive centre.

Bishbishi Garden Village (☎ 0693 640 727; www.bishbishi.com; Sharia Al-Mashraba, Mashraba; s/d/tr with fan E£25/35/45, with private bathroom & air-con from E£60/80/120; ☺) Consistently popular with the young backpacker crowd, this sprawling place is a street away from the beach but makes up for it with cheerful staff, huge family rooms and lots of cushion areas to relax with all your new mates. Jimmy, the cowboy hat-wearing owner, can arrange 'anything, anywhere' including jeep safaris, diving excursions and buses to the border.

Sunplash (☎ 364 0932; www.sunplash-divers.com; Mashraba; bungalow E£50, s/d with private bathroom from E£60/120; ☺) A friendly German-run dive centre set on its own at the southern end of Mashraba, with a quiet beachfront location and your choice of bungalows or simple but comfortable rooms. All are spotless, and

there's a pleasant restaurant and a beachside lounging area. Owner Anita encourages a personal atmosphere with guests all eating together. If you are thinking of staying for a while check out the special weekly half-board prices.

Bedouin Lodge (☎ 364 0317; www.bedouin-lodge-dahab.com; Mashraba; s/d from E£73/103; ☺) One of the few Bedouin-run places in town, this has the feel of a small hotel, with more upscale rooms than the nearby camps – all with private bathroom and some with balconies that have views of the water. There's also a dive centre and a pretty good restaurant, which is known for its large portions. The compound is at the southern end of the boardwalk.

MIDRANGE

Inmo Hotel (☎ 364 0370; www.inmodivers.de; Mashraba; s/d 'backpacker' US\$18/25, d US\$45, with air-con, private bathroom & balcony US\$58; ☺ ☑) With colourful rooms, domed ceilings and attractive furniture, this well-run, family-friendly hotel mainly caters to people on diving packages from Europe, especially Germany, although it does take in stray travellers if there's room. Rooms have a fan, most have a bathroom, some have air-con and the best ones have balconies overlooking the beach. There are a few mountain bikes for guests to use and childcare can be arranged, as can camel/dive safaris.

Mirage Village (☎ 364 0341; www.mirage.com; Assalah; s/d E£125/221; ☺) A good choice if you're looking for the laid-back ambience of a camp, but with some comfort. Simple but stylishly designed with rooms – all with fly screens and bathroom – set around a courtyard, plus there's a cushioned waterside seating area and a restaurant. Mirage offers a whole host of activities such as trips to St Katherine's Monastery and Bedouin dinners in the mountains. The hotel is just north of the lighthouse area.

Alf Leila (☎ 364 0595; www.dahab-a-different-way.com; Fanar St, Masbat; small/large d US\$32/45; ☺) Dahab has needed a boutique hotel for a long time, and Alf Leila has filled the gap with this tasteful B&B set around a Moroccan-style courtyard complete with plunge pool. The eight rooms are uniquely decorated in a myriad of colours, each with an Arabesque touch such as copper bowl sinks and gorgeous tiling. Some of the larger rooms have discreet kitchenettes and all have access to

a communal balcony with sun beds. Guests get a key to the whole house, which gives the place an intimate feel. The only drawback is the hotel's position, which is on a main road quite far back from the beach.

Blue Beach Club (☎ 364 0411; www.bluebeachclub.com; Assalah; d US\$35; ☺) Owned by a university professor, this pretty hotel is on a windy stretch of beach at the northern end of Assalah. The 20 newly renovated rooms sit amid excellent facilities such as a rooftop yoga studio, horse stables and an Arabic language centre that offers two- to four-week courses, where you study in the morning and lounge around the freshwater pool for the rest of the day.

Eating

Leila's Bakery (☎ 364 0594; Fanar St, Masbat; dishes E£12-15; ☎ 7am-7pm) Away from the beach, this traditional German bakery turns out mouth-watering cheesecake and old-fashioned pastries that go very well with the espresso coffee. Salads and sandwiches are also served in the small garden.

Eel Garden Stars (☎ 069 640 780; Assalah; dishes E£15-40) The sort of café that you got to for breakfast and find yourself still hanging around in the late afternoon. The best thing about this attractive beachside place is its easy access to the Eel Garden snorkelling site – that and the good food. See if you still float after a bowl of the *mahshi* (rice with onion, tomato, cinnamon and herbs) by renting a mask and snorkel (E£15) from the restaurant. Eel Garden Stars is about 300m north of the lighthouse.

Nirvana Indian Restaurant (☎ 364 1261; Masbat; dishes E£20-50) Dahab's best Indian food, including an impressive vegetarian selection. The chefs are more than happy to make any dish as spicy or mild as you like. Popular with English backpackers who can be found spending whole days sipping chai in the cushion area.

Carm Inn (☎ 364 1300; Masbat; dishes E£25-65) This waterfront place describes itself as 'seven kitchens in one', but whatever cuisine it's channelling, it tastes great to us (and the local dive instructors who turn up in droves). The varied Western, Indian and Indonesian menu features all fresh ingredients and includes some inventive vegetarian and fish dishes. The mellow surroundings offer a hint of the South Pacific, with hanging plants and

interesting decoration – a wonderful escape from the sometimes noisy promenade.

Tarbouche (☎ 010 657 7625; Masbat; dishes E£50) Order before midday if you want to experience a delicious three-course feast in the home of local identity Yasser Tarbouche, a chef from Cairo. The exclusively Egyptian dishes are all carefully prepared and come with a range of fresh salads and a soup. Ask if the goat is available. Tarbouche is in a little street behind Jay's restaurant. Look for the electrical tower.

Drinking

Dahab is fairly quiet at night; however, it has a small selection of lively bars, some of which turn into discos if the atmosphere is right.

Furry Cup (☎ 364 0411; Blue Beach Club, Assalah) One of the most popular spots in town, and the bar of choice for many of Dahab's diving instructors, Furry Cup has cushioned chairs, a lively atmosphere and good music. Happy hour is daily from 6pm to 8pm.

Rush (☎ 069 3641 866; Masbat) Probably the closest to a real club atmosphere, Rush is big with locals who come to check out the Italian DJs from Sharm, who play every Friday night. There's a large garden out the back, which is nice to relax in with a late-night beer.

Getting There & Away

East Delta Bus Co (☎ 364 1808; Dahab City), with its new station in Dahab City, well southwest of the centre of action, has buses to Nuweiba (E£11, one hour) leaving at 8.30am and 10.30am. The 10.30am bus continues on to Taba (E£22, two hours). There is a 9.30am bus to St Katherine's Monastery (E£16, 2½ hours).

WADI GNAI

☎ 069

وادي جناء

About twenty minutes south of Dahab is the beautiful protected oasis of Wadi Gnai. If you're after some sun, sea and solitude, consider staying on this gorgeous beach, which is generally empty aside from the occasional four-wheel drive filled with divers racing towards the nearby dive sites.

For accommodation, stay with Tariq and Georgia at **El Beit** (☎ 010 229 4153; gjorgipsyj@libero.it; s/d with breakfast E£90/140), an old sandstone home that it has turned into a lovely guesthouse. The three rooms here are extremely

comfortable with large beds and tasteful decoration. There's not much to do, but that's the attraction. Go snorkelling right outside the house, rent a kayak (££70 per hour) or let Georgia, an Italian, fatten you up with her excellent home cooking.

Otherwise, try **Full Moon Café** (☎ 020 258 5870; s/d ££10/15), where tepees meet the South Pacific, with interestingly designed huts and a breezy cushion area complete with hammocks and pool tables. The food is cheap and cheerful and the kitchen super clean.

Both Full Moon Café and El Beit offer good food (phone ahead for El Beit) and there are various shacks along the beach serving Egyptian standards.

Tariq from El Beit and the owner of Full Moon, Hashem, will pick you up from Dahab if you call ahead. Otherwise, you can only get to Wadi Gnai on a tour or diving trip.

ST KATHERINE'S MONASTERY & MT SINAI

☎ 069

Sinai's rugged interior, with desolate mountains, wind-sculpted canyons and wadis, is a region of breathtaking beauty. This isolated backdrop is also where you will find ancient remains sacred to all the world's major monotheistic religions.

St Katherine's Monastery

دير سانت كاترين

Tucked into a barren valley at the foot of Mt Sinai, the ancient **St Katherine's Monastery** (sinai@tedata.net.eg; admission free; ☎ 9am-noon Mon-Thu & Sat, except religious holidays) has been a place of pilgrimage since the 4th century. It traces its founding to about AD 330, when the Roman empress Helena had a small chapel and a fortified refuge for local hermits built beside what was believed to be the burning bush from which God spoke to Moses. Today St Katherine's is considered one of the oldest continually functioning monastic communities in the world, and its chapel is one of early Christianity's only surviving churches. It's also a Unesco World Heritage site.

Although much of the monastery is closed to the public, it is possible to enter the ornately decorated 6th-century Church of the Transfiguration, with its nave flanked by massive marble columns and walls covered in richly gilded icons and paintings.

Don't miss the **Monastery Museum** (adult/child under 12/student ££25/free/10), which has recently been magnificently restored and features many of the monastery's artistic treasures, including some of the spectacular Byzantine-era icons from its world-famous collection.

Mt Sinai

جبل سيناء

Rising up out of the desert and jutting above the other peaks surrounding the monastery is the towering 2285m Mt Sinai, which is known locally as Gebel Musa. Although some archaeologists and historians dispute Mt Sinai's biblical claim to fame, it is revered by Christians, Muslims and Jews, all of whom believe that God delivered his Ten Commandments to Moses at its summit. The mountain is easy and beautiful to climb, and – except at the summit, where you'll invariably be overwhelmed with crowds of other visitors – it offers a taste of the serenity and magnificence of southern Sinai's high mountain region.

There are two routes up the mountain, both of which take the climber at least two hours. The camel trail is the easier route. The trail is wide, clear and gently sloping as it moves up a series of switchbacks, with the only potential difficulty – apart from sometimes fierce winds – being gravelly patches that can be slippery on the descent.

The alternative path to the summit, the taxing 3750 Steps of Repentance, was laid by one monk as a form of penance. If you want to try both routes, it's best to take the path on the way up and the steps on the way back down. If you get tired of tramping up the uneven trail there is no shortage of Bedouins who will take you to the top on a donkey or camel for about ££60.

Dress warmly – even in summer it's freezing at the top. At the summit you can rent blankets but it's best to take a good jacket. A torch is also handy and these are available to rent.

The best time to climb is before dawn so you can enjoy the spectacular sunrise, but some people recommend a late-afternoon climb for the sunset.

Sleeping & Eating

Half-board includes bed, breakfast and dinner. There are supermarkets and a row of identical restaurants – serving huge portions

of not terribly great food – around the bus stop.

Monastery Guesthouse (☎ 347 0353; fax 347 0543; St Katherine's Monastery; dm per person half-board US\$20, s/d/tr with private bathroom & half-board US\$32/54/69) This simple guesthouse just next to the monastery has comfortable rooms with heaters and blankets to keep out the mountain chill, and a pleasant patio area with views towards the mountains. Meals are filling and tasty, and management will let you leave your baggage in one of the rooms while you hike up Mt Sinai.

Getting There & Away

There is one bus a day leaving Dahab at 9.30am for St Katherine's. The bus for Dahab departs at 1pm. You can also reach St Katherine's from Taba (££25, four hours). The monastery is about 3.5km from the village of Al-Milga (which is where buses from

Dahab will drop you). From there most could easily walk or pick up a service taxi.

Service taxis usually wait at the monastery for people coming down from Mt Sinai in the morning, and then again around midday when visiting hours end. A lift to the village costs ££10 to ££15 per person. You should plan on spending approximately ££30/45 per person to Dahab/Sharm el-Sheikh.

The easiest way to get to Mt Sinai is to pick up a tour in Dahab or Nuweiba. These tours generally leave at midnight for the two-hour drive to the base of the mountain, in time to make your way up to the summit for the spectacular sunrise. Consider walking down in the morning, visiting the monastery and then returning to the beach.

Tours run daily and cost from US\$40. Try **Embah Safari** (☎ 3641 690; embah@link.net; Masbat) in Dahab.

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