

Egypt

A land of magnificent World Heritage Sites and a thousand tourist clichés, Egypt was enticing visitors millennia before Mr Thomas Cook sailed his first steamers up the Nile. It was in Egypt that the Holy Family sheltered, Alexander conquered and Mark Anthony flirted. Napoleon stopped long enough to pilfer a few obelisks, the Ottomans paused to prop up the great and barbarous pasha Mohammed Ali, and the British stayed around to get the train system running and furnish every spare nook of the British Museum. And all this was long, long after Menes united the two states of Upper and Lower Egypt, and set the stage for the greatest civilisation the world has ever known.

Lingering over coffee in one of Alexandria's cosmopolitan cafes or sipping a calming glass of *shai* (tea) after a frenzied shopping episode in Cairo's Khan al-Khalili are activities as popular today as they were back in the 19th century, when tourists started arriving en masse. Magnificent monuments are everywhere – the pointed perfection of the pyramids, the soaring minarets of Cairo's skyline and the majestic tombs and temples of Luxor are just a few of the wonders that generations of visitors have admired during their city sojourns, jaunts up and down the Nile and expeditions through spectacularly stark desert landscapes.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 997,739 sq km
- **ATMs** In most large towns
- **Borders** Libya, Sudan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories
- **Budget** US\$50 per day
- **Capital** Cairo
- **Language** Arabic
- **Money** Egyptian pound; US\$1 = E£5.50, €1 = E£7.80
- **Population** 81.7 million
- **Seasons** Winter/high (October to April); summer/low (May to September)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 20; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC +2
- **Visa** Required for citizens of most countries



HOW MUCH?

- **Local newspaper** US\$0.25 to US\$0.50
- **Cup of tea** US\$0.05
- **Small inlaid box** US\$5
- **Camel ride** US\$6 per hour
- **Museum admission** US\$12

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$1
- **1L bottled water** US\$0.50 to US\$0.75
- **Bottle of Stella** US\$2 to US\$3
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$6 to US\$8
- **Full sandwich** US\$0.10

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Cairo** (p86) Witness life and death in epic proportions in this timeless city of pyramids.
- **Luxor** (p110) Explore the temples and tombs of the ancient city of Thebes.
- **Alexandria** (p103) Admire colonial grandeur through a cloud of *sheesha* (water pipe) smoke at a period cafe.
- **Abu Simbel** (p118) Sense Pharaoh Ramses II's vanity in the monumental Great Temple.
- **Dahab** (p99) Kick back at this backpackers' paradise on the shores of the Red Sea.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

From December to February, Lower Egypt (Cairo and north) is often overcast and chilly, with regular downpours of rain in Alexandria, and below-zero temperatures at night in Sinai, while Upper Egypt (south of Cairo) is warm with clear, blue skies.

Between June and September, temperatures range from 31°C on the Mediterranean coast to an unbearable 50°C in Aswan.

The best time to visit is in spring (March to April) or autumn (October and November) when you should pack for hot weather in the south and include a light jacket for the north.

ITINERARIES

- **Three Days** Be seduced by the pyramids at the sound-and-light show (p91); chart

the origins of ancient Egypt in Saqqara and Dahshur (p97); go swapping old lamps for new in Islamic Cairo (p91) and flex the ocular muscles at a belly-dancing venue (p96).

- **Two Weeks** When you've exhausted Cairo, take the overnight train to Luxor (p110) and wake up in ancient Egypt (p110) for three days of archaeological exploration. Then lounge on a boat to Aswan (p115) visiting Edfu (p115) and Kom Ombo (p115) en route, and make time to savour Abu Simbel (p118) by night.
- **One Month** Fly back to Luxor and retrace the old caravan route through the oases of the Western Desert (p107), allowing three days to chill in the coffee-houses of Alexandria (p103), or swim with angel fish at the Red Sea resort of Dahab (p99). There's also time to listen for commandments on Mt Sinai (p101), become a boat spotter by the Suez Canal (p101) and sample dates in the Siwa Oasis (p107).

HISTORY
Life on the Nile

Most of Egypt's landmass consists of deserts, with the nation's lifeblood, the Nile River, a green band shivering along the length of the country, drawing to it the nation's settlements, including the disproportionately large capital, Cairo. Charismatic rivers flow through many cities in the world, but few govern the ebb and flow of a country's fortunes quite as significantly as the Nile has shaped Egypt and its shifting capitals of the delta.

From at least the year 4000 BC, small settlements clung together in loose affiliations along the Nile, developing into two important states. The delta area in the north became known as Lower Egypt, and the area upstream of the delta was called Upper Egypt. The unification of these two states – around 3100 BC by the Pharaoh Menes – sowed the seeds for the flowering of ancient Egyptian civilisation.

Old, Middle & New Kingdoms

Ancient Egyptian history comprises three principal kingdoms. The pyramids date from the Old Kingdom (2670–2150 BC), when lively trade made ambitious building projects possible. Ruling from the nearby capital of Memphis, Pharaoh Zoser and his