

# On the Road



## MATTHEW D FIRESTONE *Coordinating Author*

Sometimes a picture really does speak a thousand words, which is convenient given that sunrise at the top of Mt Sinai (p497) awed me with its brilliance, and left me utterly speechless. Fortunately, my Bedouin guide recognised my trance-like state and snapped this photo just as the morning light washed away the stars and ignited the sky.



**ANTHONY SATTIN** Too often the tombs and temples in Luxor and Aswan are so packed you can do no more than dodge the crowds, which adds to the joy of finding yourself somewhere a little more remote. Most of the ancient sites between Abydos and Cairo are empty these days but the difficulties of reaching them can dampen the thrill. Now without the need to travel in a police convoy on the Luxor–Aswan route, reaching somewhere like Gebel Siilsila (p296) is a lot easier and well worth the effort.



**THOMAS HALL** Third dive of the afternoon, crystal-clear and bath-warm water, hanging out 30 feet below the surface watching turtles, sharks and a veritable smorgasbord of incredibly colourful little Nemos dart by, soon to ascend back to the boat for ice-cold gin-and-tonics and a simple, filling dinner served by the cook – yawn, just another average day diving in the Red Sea (p441).



**MICHAEL BENANAV** I love experiencing the intense personality changes that the Western Desert (p326) undergoes every day. Its brutal midday heat provides the perfect excuse to nap somewhere shady; its sunsets are vibrant and alluring; at night it's quiet and kind and, with a dazzling starscape overhead, so easy to be psyched to be alive.

# Destination 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 Antony 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 one of the greatest civilisations 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 when 19th-century tourists started to arrive en masse. Magnificent monuments are everywhere – the pointed perfection of the Pyramids, soaring minarets of Cairo's skyline and 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.

Beyond the graceful symmetry and calculated order of the country's ancient pyramid and temple complexes, Egypt is bursting at the seams. More than half a century on from the great Nasser-led revolution, Egypt is in a pretty bad state. Unemployment is rife, the economy is of the basket-case variety and terrorist attacks are starting to occur with worrying regularity. Once home to the all-powerful pharaohs, the country has largely been reduced to a dependent state of the USA, having received more than US\$30 billion dollars in military aid and economic assistance over the past three decades.

The list of woes continues: torture and ill-treatment of prisoners in detention by police, described by Amnesty International as 'systematic'; the issue of child labour, particularly within the lucrative national cotton industry (UNICEF reports over one million children are believed to work in this industry alone); regularly reported cases of 'administrative detention' of individuals without trial, which has brought criticism from both local media and international human rights organisations; continuing restrictions on women under personal-status laws, which, for example, deny the freedom to travel without permission; rampant inflation, leading to food shortages within the poorest communities; and constant environmental threats, with polluted waterways, overpopulation, unregulated emissions and soil salinity being of serious concern.

Against the backdrop of America's 'War on Terror', Egypt has weathered a storm of internal strife, and struggled to define its identity as a moderate Islamic country. On one hand, Egypt was a member of former US President George W Bush's ill-fated 'Coalition of the Willing', and the sultry belly dancing of underground pop sensation Dina helped spark a debate on the nation's traditional views of sexuality. On the other hand, Egyptian opinion polls have shown outrage over Bush's support of Israel, and the emergence of televangelist Amr Khaled is credited with encouraging young girls to start wearing the headscarf.

While it remains to be seen whether or not the Barack Hussein Obama presidency will redefine America's image in the region, the promise of change is alive and well. Several months after taking the oath of office, President

## FAST FACTS

Population: 83 million

Population growth rate:  
1.6%

Inflation: 18.3%

GDP: US\$443 billion

Main exports: Petroleum,  
petroleum products,  
cotton

Average annual income:  
US\$4200

Average male life  
expectancy: 69 years

Average female life  
expectancy: 74 years

Male literacy rate: 83%

Female literacy rate: 59%

Estimated number of  
taxis in the Cairo area:  
50,000

Obama made good on his word to deliver a speech in a major Islamic capital. The venue for this historic address was none other than Cairo University, and Egyptians from all walks of life tuned in to hear the words of a Western emissary, whose middle name means 'good' or 'handsome' in the Arabic language. Pledging a new beginning between America and Muslims around the world, Obama sought to forge a relationship based on mutual interest and respect.

Unfortunately, it's politics as usual on the home front, with more than a quarter of a century having passed since Hosni Mubarak and his wife Suzanne first set up house in the presidential palace. While he has drawn a small measure of political legitimacy from a series of highly contested elections alongside the continued implementation of martial law (first declared in 1981 following the assassination of former President Sadat), the fact remains that Mubarak is one of Africa's longest-serving 'Big Men'. Born in 1928, Mubarak is now well into his golden years, though his health is something of a closely guarded state secret.

Mubarak's imminent demise raises some serious questions about the future political and economic stability of Egypt. While it's widely believed that Mubarak's younger son, Gamal, is being groomed for the role of president, the Mubarak family continues to deny such allegations. Regardless of who takes control of the country, the next president (or pseudo-monarch) will have to address some very real issues, including Islamic fundamentalism, domestic terrorism, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the changing economic scene, which are all to some degree interconnected.

Indeed, the last couple of years have been marked by further terror attacks in Cairo, riots over the price of wheat and border instability with the Gaza Strip. To his credit, Mubarak has carefully walked a thin line in his attempts to maintain order at home while brokering peace between Israel and the Palestinian Territories, though critics are quick to describe his actions as being little more than chasing rats off a sinking ship. One bright note for visitors has been the lifting of decade-old restrictions that forced travellers into tourist convoys in the Nile Valley, which will ultimately foster more independent travel throughout the country.

Of course, one of the many reasons why Egypt remains such a fascinating tourist destination is that it is very much a country in flux. Egypt may be famous the world over for the Pyramids of Giza and the Valley of the Kings, but these ancient monuments are just part of the equation. Whether in the suffocating density of Cairo's city streets or the harsh elements of the open desert, the Egyptians are an incredibly resilient people who find humour and optimism in the most unlikely of circumstances. While your travels in Egypt won't always be easygoing and hassle-free, they'll certainly be eye-opening, to say the least.

# Getting Started

Egypt is the most traveller-friendly country in North Africa and the Middle East. Most of the tourist spots are well connected by cheap buses, and many are also linked by trains and planes. Accommodation is plentiful, particularly in the budget and top-end categories, and decent eateries are thick on the ground in nearly every corner of the country. Unlike in some other parts of the region, enjoying a beer, meeting the locals and accessing the internet are all things that can be taken for granted. Predeparture planning will usually guarantee your accommodation of choice but on the whole it's not necessary – unless you're on a tight timetable, it's usually more enjoyable to leave your itinerary in the lap of the gods. After all, there are a lot of them to call on...

## WHEN TO GO

The best time to visit Egypt depends on where you want to go. Generally speaking, winter (December to February) is the tourist high season and summer (June to August) is the low season in all parts of the country except on the coasts, and to a lesser degree in Cairo. Hotel prices reflect this.

In terms of weather, June to August is unbearable almost anywhere south of Cairo, especially around Luxor and Aswan, where daytime temperatures soar up to 40°C. Summer in Cairo is almost as hot and the combination of heat, dust, pollution, noise and crush makes walking the city streets a real test of endurance. On the other hand, a scorching sun might be exactly what's wanted for a week or two of slow roasting on the beaches of southern Sinai, the Alexandrian coast or the Red Sea – just be prepared to fight for hotel rooms with locals on their summer holidays and Gulf Arabs escaping the even greater heat in their home countries.

When visiting somewhere such as Luxor, winter is easily the most comfortable time. Cairo isn't quite as pleasant, with often overcast skies and chilly evenings, while up on the Mediterranean coast Alexandria is subject to frequent downpours resulting in flooded, muddy streets. Even Sinai's beaches are a little too chilly for sunbathing in January. The happiest compromise for an all-Egypt trip is to visit in spring (March to May) or autumn (September to November).

Most of Egypt's religious and state holidays (for dates see p513) last only one or two days at most and should not seriously disrupt any travel plans. Buses, however, may be fully booked around the two *eids* (feasts) and on Sham an-Nessim. Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, can be seriously disruptive to your best-laid travel plans. During daylight hours many cafes and restaurants are closed, while bars cease business completely for the duration. Offices also operate at reduced and very erratic hours.

## COSTS & MONEY

By international standards Egypt is still fairly cheap, though admission fees, guided tours and private transportation can really hike up the costs.

If you're a hard-core budget traveller, it's possible to get by on about US\$20 a day or maybe less, though you will have to stick to the cheapest hotels, eat the staple snacks of *fuul* and *ta'amিয়া*, use the cheapest local transport and limit your sightseeing. At the other end of the scale, Egypt has plenty of accommodation charging upwards of US\$200 a night, and some of the better restaurants will set you back US\$20 per person or more.

See Climate Charts (p508) for more information.

**DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...**

There is very little that you might need and won't be able to find in Egypt. That said, you may not have the same degree of choice as at home.

- Sunglasses, sunscreen and a hat
- A torch (flashlight)
- Earplugs if you're a light sleeper (bus rides are rarely quiet, Cairo is a very noisy city and throughout the country dawn is accompanied by the amplified voice of the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer)
- A sweater or light jacket for winter evenings in desert areas
- Contact-lens solution, roll-on mosquito repellent, tampons and contraceptives (all sometimes difficult to find and expensive)
- Checking the travel advisories for a current security update (p511)

Taking a middle route, if you stay in a modest hotel with a fan and private bathroom, eat in low-key restaurants frequented by locals (allowing for occasional meals at more upmarket eateries), and aim to see a couple of sites each day, you'll be looking at between US\$30 and US\$50 a day.

It is inexpensive to get around the country: the 10-hour train ride between Cairo and Luxor can cost less than US\$10 in 2nd class, and even domestic flights on EgyptAir can cost less than US\$100. However, the cost of private taxis and chartered minibuses between tourist destinations can quickly add up, though these are often the safest and most comfortable way to travel.

The major expense is going to be the entry fees to tourist sites. Foreigners are seen as dollars on legs, so places where they flock tend to be pricey. A complete visit to the Giza Pyramids costs more than US\$50 in admission charges, while seeing the mummies at the Egyptian Museum costs about US\$25. However, if you have a valid International Student Identity Card (ISIC), you can rack up some good discounts. Of course, no card will make you exempt from the demands for baksheesh, which can seriously drain your wallet if you're not careful.

A service charge of between 10% and 15% is applied in most upmarket restaurants and hotels, to which value-added tax (VAT) and municipal taxes are also added. In other words, the price that you are quoted at a hotel or read on a menu could be almost 25% higher when it comes to paying the bill.

**TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY**

When backpackers first started blazing the hippie trail across the old Silk Road during the 1960s and 1970s, sustainability was an implicit concept that few people needed to give much thought. Travel at the time was nearly always slow, overland and utterly dependant on local economies.

Things change, however, and sometimes in dramatic ways. Today, travel is one of the world's fastest-growing industries, and is one of the largest single contributors to the Egyptian economy. But this growth has also placed enormous stress on both the environment and traditional communities, and threatens to destroy the very destinations that tourists are seeking out.

One of the simplest things you can do before embarking on a trip to Egypt is to learn about pressing conservation and environmental issues – for more information, see the Environment chapter, p88. While travelling around the country, don't be afraid to ask questions – usually the best source of information about an area is from those actually living there.

**HOW MUCH?**

Meal in a cheap restaurant ££15 to ££25

Meal in a good restaurant ££65 to ££125

Glass of tea ££2 to ££3

Short taxi hop ££5 to ££10

Average museum admission ££30

### TIPS FOR TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

Take only photographs, leave only footprints – the following is a list of Lonely Planet author-tested tips for minimising the impact of your stay and limiting your ecological footprint.

**Learn the language** Although English is widely spoken as a second language in Egypt, it's well worth making an effort to learn a bit of Arabic. Knowing the basic greetings will win the respect of locals, and a firm command of the numbers will give you some bargaining power.

**Sail the Nile** The only choice for Cleopatra is still the best way to go for 21st-century travellers. Until recently feluccas were the only sail-powered option but there are now a growing number of dahabiyas (houseboats), most of them operating between Esna and Aswan.

**Rent a bike** The opening of the bridge across the Nile in Luxor has seen a huge rise in the number of coaches and taxis on the West Bank, with all the usual issues of pollution. But bikes are easy to rent on both sides of the river and slow travelling gives you a different perspective on the country.

**Don't bribe guards** Do give them a present if you want – they are paid so little that any amount will be welcome – but don't bribe them to let you bend or break rules that are meant to protect local sites.

**Don't touch the ruins** The deterioration of temples, pyramids and monuments due to rampant overtourism has reached critical levels. Unless drastic measures are taken, a large percentage of reliefs and paintings may be gone in another generation.

**Dress conservatively** Rural areas in the deserts are home to very conservative communities that do not see many travellers. Be cautious with revealing dress, showing affection in public and any behaviour that may offend sensibilities.

**Use a pump** For many travellers, drinking bottled water is a necessity. However, you can go easy on the plastic by bringing your own pump and filtering the tap water.

Community preservation is one area where travellers can make the biggest individual difference. While in Egypt, talk to the locals about their customs and practices. Indeed, the best window into a local culture might be sitting next to you on the bus or sharing a bench with you in a cafe. And you never know where a conversation will take you.

Finally, one of the most immediate benefits of tourism is the financial boost. A great way of stimulating local economies in a sustainable manner is to frequent businesses that are dedicated to these aims. For a list of eco-friendly businesses in Egypt, see the GreenDex, p571.

### TRAVEL LITERATURE

*In an Antique Land* by Amitav Ghosh is a wonderfully observant account of the author's lengthy stay in a Delta village. It's entertaining, educational and one of the few travel books that is not patronising towards its subject.

*The Pharaoh's Shadow* by Anthony Sattin is travel literature with a twist. Sattin searches for 'survivals' of Pharaonic traditions and practices in the Egypt of today, encountering magicians, snake catchers, mystics and sceptics along the way. Also by Anthony Sattin, *Florence Nightingale's Letters from Egypt* tells of the five-month trip that the famous 'Lady with the Lamp' took through Egypt in the winter of 1849–50. The book is packed with 19th-century images.

*The Blue Nile* and *The White Nile* by Alan Moorhead form a two-volume tour de force describing the search for sources of the Nile.

*Flaubert in Egypt: A Sensibility on Tour*, translated and edited by Francis Steegmuller, includes choice excerpts from Flaubert's diary as he made his way up the Nile. Detailed descriptions of Upper Egyptian dancing girls and prostitutes spice up his accounts of ancient sites.

*A Thousand Miles Up the Nile* by Amelia Edwards is a travel classic describing a 19th-century journey from Cairo to Abu Simbel and back on a dahabiyya.

*Letters from Egypt* by Lucie Duff Gordon is the journal of a solo woman traveller who lived in Luxor for seven years from 1862 to 1869.

*Travels with a Tangerine: A Journey in the Footnotes of Ibn Battutah* by Tim Mackintosh-Smith sees the modern-day author following the route taken by the medieval adventurer; three great chapters are set in Egypt.

*Cairo: The City Victorious* by Max Rodenbeck offers a broad history of Cairo and a commentary on modern social life – it's great for helping foreigners adjust their attitudes to the city.

## PREDEPARTURE FILM VIEWING

In recent years taxes levied on foreign film companies have kept the cameras away (that's Tunisia standing in for Egypt in *The English Patient* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Arizona in *Stargate*, and computer-generated imagery in the remake of *The Mummy*). But even if they haven't been shot on location, there are plenty of films that evoke the country and its colourful history splendidly. All make great predeparture viewing.

*The Ten Commandments* (1956) with Charlton Heston, Yul Brynner and Anne Baxter is an enduring classic about the Exodus of the Israelites out of Egypt.

*Cleopatra* (1963) starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton almost bankrupted 20th Century Fox, though the film remains the best onscreen adaptation of the famous love affair between Mark Antony and Cleopatra.

*The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977) starring Roger Moore as James Bond follows the exploits of the original international man of mystery as he travels

## TOP PICKS



### JOURNEYS

Given the array of transport options – from donkey to luxury dahabiyya – Egypt is one place where the journey itself can be the adventure. These are just a few worth experiencing while you're here.

- Taxi (p182) or bus ride (p180) through the chaos of Cairo
- Camel or horse ride from Giza to Saqqara (p145)
- Cycling around the West Bank in Luxor (p288)
- Felucca down the Nile between Luxor and Aswan (p99)
- Donkey cart around Siwa Oasis (p366)
- Jeep expedition through the Great Sand Sea (p328)

### SLEEPS

Whatever your budget and style, there's accommodation in Egypt to suit you.

- Beach camp – Penguin Village, Dahab (p480)
- Boutique hotel – Talisman Hotel, Cairo (p161)
- Budget hotels – Hotel Luna, Cairo (p160) and Nefertiti Hotel, Luxor (p278)
- Ecolodges – Basata, Mahash (p491) and Adrére Amellal, Siwa (p362)
- Hotel with a view – Desert Lodge, Dakhla (p342)
- Luxury hotel – Al-Moudira, Luxor (p282)

to Egypt and meets the lovely Agent Triple X in front of the Pyramids of Giza.

Based on an Agatha Christie novel, *Death on the Nile* (1978) featuring Peter Ustinov and Jane Birkin follows the murder investigation of Belgian detective Hercule Poirot as he travels along the Nile.

*Al-Mohager* (The Emigrant; 1994) by Egyptian director Youssef Chahine is a beautiful avant-garde Arabic film that relates the journey through life of a man who has been rejected by his family.

Although it doesn't actually show Egypt, *The English Patient* (1996) with Ralph Fiennes and Kristin Scott Thomas depicts a love story set against the North Africa campaign of WWII.

*The Yacoubian Building* (2006), an onscreen adaptation of the best-selling Egyptian novel by Alaa al-Aswany, is a scathing commentary on the modern decay of Egypt's political system.

*Transformers 2: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009) isn't exactly critically acclaimed cinema but Shia Labeouf and Megan Fox do look pretty dashing as they're racing alongside giant robots in Luxor and Giza.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

**Al-Ahram Weekly** (<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg>) Electronic version of the weekly English-language newspaper. Almost the whole paper is online and the archives are fully searchable and free to access.

**Egypt: The Complete Guide** ([www.egypt.travel](http://www.egypt.travel)) The official site of the Egyptian Tourist Authority is updated fairly regularly with magazine-type features, news and a huge range of resources and links.

**Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) Includes summaries on travelling to Egypt, the Thorn Tree forum, travel news and links to the most useful travel resources on the web.

**Red Sea Guide & Search Engine** ([www.red-sea.com](http://www.red-sea.com)) This site does exactly what the name suggests: provides heaps of travel tips and water-sports information and links.

**State Information Service** ([www.sis.gov.eg](http://www.sis.gov.eg)) A large amount of information on tourism, geography and culture, plus a great many useful links.

**Theban Mapping Project** ([www.thebanmappingproject.com](http://www.thebanmappingproject.com)) Professor Kent Weeks' website dedicated to all things to do with the Valley of the Kings. One of the best Egyptology websites out there.

# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### EGYPT BENEATH THE SURFACE

More than One Month / Cairo to Sinai plus Siwa & Petra

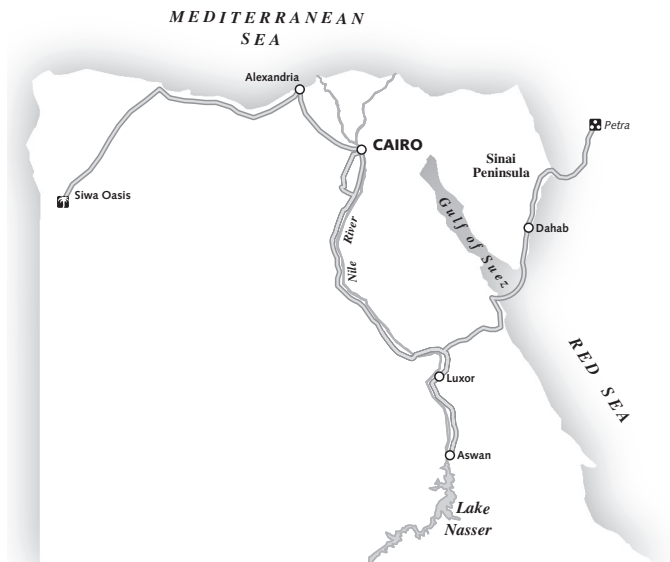
In a month or more you could cover most of Egypt's main sights and still have time to explore the Western Desert and even southern Jordan.

While in **Cairo** (p109), include a visit to **Coptic Cairo** (p125), the oldest part of modern-day Cairo and the Christian heartland of the city.

Before heading south to Aswan, take an early train north to Alexandria and a bus for **Siwa Oasis** (p355), one of Egypt's most idyllic spots. After hanging out in this tranquil haven, backtrack along the Mediterranean coast to **Alexandria** (p369) and spend a couple of days in its wonderful cafes and museums.

Take the sleeper train (or plane) to **Aswan** (p299), then back to **Luxor** (p239) and eventually **Dahab** (p476). Here, you should slow down and enjoy the laid-back Bedouin vibe of Sinai, pausing only to arrange the obligatory **dive trip** (p447) and/or **desert safari** (p479). Finally, say goodbye (temporarily) to Egypt on a brief excursion to Jordan and the ancient Nabataean city of **Petra** (p492), one of the 'New Seven Wonders of the World'.

If you have more than a month, you could comfortably cover over 2000km and visit Egypt's far-flung desert oases in addition to Jordan's ancient city of Petra.



**WHISTLE-STOP NILE TOUR****One to Two Weeks / Cairo to Abu Simbel**

On a punishing schedule, one to two weeks is just enough time to traverse the length of the Nile Valley and see some of Egypt's most famous sights.

Two days in **Cairo** (p109) will allow you to see the astounding **Pyramids of Giza** (p144), seek out the treasures in the **Egyptian Museum** (p183) and shop till you drop in **Khan al-Khalili** (p130). Catch the overnight train (or a quick flight) to **Luxor** (p239), arriving early in the morning – the perfect time to head over to the **West Bank** (p255) to see the monuments of the ancient necropolis of Thebes. In two days you can visit most major sights, including the **Valley of the Kings** (p258), the **Valley of the Queens** (p273) and **Deir al-Bahri** (Temple of Hatshepsut; p267). Spend the afternoons and evenings cooling off on the **East Bank** (p243), but be sure to save time for the spectacular **temples of Karnak** (p243) and **Luxor** (p250).

You can either jump on a morning train to **Aswan** (p299), or spend a few days sailing down the Nile on a budget-friendly **felucca** (p101) or a luxurious five-star **cruiser** (p105). From Aswan, you absolutely must visit **Abu Simbel** (p323), the grandest of all Pharaonic monuments, which is perched on the edge of Lake Nasser. With a day or two to spare, you can explore Aswan's other highlights including the **Nubia Museum** (p302) and the **Unfinished Obelisk** (p303) before highailing it back to Cairo.

**The 1000km Whistle-Stop Nile Tour will race you along the lifeline of Egypt – the Nile River – teasing you with a brief taste of what this country can offer.**



## TRAVELLING AT A STEADY PACE

### Two Weeks to One Month / Cairo to Sinai

Two weeks to a month is an ideal amount of time to get the most out of the Nile Valley while including the Sinai Peninsula on your journey.

Starting in **Cairo** (p109), be sure to add the **Step Pyramid of Zoser** (p198) at Saqqara and the **Bent** (p205) and **Red Pyramids** (p205) at Dahshur to your itinerary, as well as the twisting alleyways and splendid mosques of the medieval quarters of **Islamic Cairo** (p162). Take your time and spend a moment or two relaxing in one of the area's fabulous *ahwas* (coffeehouses), where you can alternate between sips of strong Turkish-style coffee and puffs of apple-scented *sheesha* (water pipe).

Next, take a train or fly straight down to **Aswan** (p299), from where you can take trips to the island **Temple of Isis** (p315) at Philae and the **West Bank** (p305), home to ancient monasteries and tombs that cling to the edges of the desert. Then, move into relaxation mode with a slow felucca or cruiser, sailing up to **Kom Ombo** (p296), site of a fine Ptolemaic-era temple dedicated to Sobek, and **Edfu** (p293), site of a fine Ptolemaic-era temple dedicated to Horus.

From here you can move on to **Luxor** (p239) before catching a bus across the Eastern Desert to the resort town of **Hurghada** (p423), where you can catch a ferry to **Sharm el-Sheikh** (p466) and on to the backpacker paradise of **Dahab** (p476). Around here you can delight in the underwater world before visiting the Greek Orthodox **St Katherine's Monastery** (p495) and climbing to the top of **Mt Sinai** (p497), revered by Muslims, Christians and Jews alike.

Whether you have two weeks or 40 days and 40 nights, you can experience at a steady pace this 1500km jaunt through the Nile Valley and Sinai.

### MEDITERRANEAN SEA



## ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

### EXPLORING THE WESTERN DESERT

Two Weeks / Luxor to Siwa

Taking inspiration from films such as *Lawrence of Arabia* and *The English Patient*, would-be desert rovers should opt for two weeks of getting sand-happy in the amazing **Western Desert** (p326).

Begin your journey by taking a bus from **Luxor** (p239) to **Al-Kharga Oasis** (p329), the southernmost oasis in the Western Desert loop. Spend a day here exploring the **Al-Kharga Museum of Antiquities** (p330) as well as the profusion of Graeco-Roman temples, tombs and other interesting ruins scattered around the oasis.

From Al-Kharga, make your way northwest to **Dakhla Oasis** (p335) for the experience of seeing the fascinating hivelike, mud-walled settlements of **Balat** (p340) and **Al-Qasr** (p341). Next, head north to either **Farafra Oasis** (p343) or **Bahariya Oasis** (p347), both of which are great places to organise trips out into the stunning **White Desert** (p346).

Real desert addicts can then strike west across several hundred kilometres of open desert to **Siwa Oasis** (p355), one of the most surreal spots in the entire country. Perched on the edge of the **Great Sand Sea** (p366), Siwa is renowned for its dates and olives, and serves as a convenient base for exploring some of the most stunning yet accessible sandscapes in Egypt.

Shun the cities for two weeks in favour of getting swept up in deserts, though be sure to take time to chill out and cool down in the stunning oases.



**EXPLORING THE SINAI PENINSULA****Two Weeks / Sharm el-Sheikh  
to Taba**

If you really want to get a taste of all the Sinai has to offer, spend about two weeks exploring its incredible desert landscapes and serene underwater world.

Starting in **Sharm el-Sheikh** (p466), the gateway to Sinai, hop on a bus to **Dahab** (p476), a laid-back town dubbed the 'Ko Samui of the Middle East'. From here, you can easily arrange all of your camel and jeep safaris to such natural wonders as the **Coloured Canyon** (p479) and the **Ras Abu Gallum Protectorate** (p483).

If you're looking to get wet, a diving trip to **Ras Mohammed National Park** (p464), home to some of the world's most spectacular reefs, is a must. Serious divers can arrange trips to more remote reefs or to the world-famous **Thistlegorm** (p451), a wrecked British supply ship that was sunk during WWII with a full cargo of military goods.

After waiting 24 hours for your body to release all that nitrogen, lace up your hiking boots and head to the **St Katherine Protectorate** (p495). Head first to **St Katherine's Monastery** (p495), which is a must for the complete biblical experience – it has the burning bush, a famous Byzantine church and a stunning icon collection. Afterwards, arrange a trek through the protectorate with a Bedouin guide, but save some energy for a night-time ascent of **Mt Sinai** (p497) in order to catch the spectacular sunrise.

After your mountain-climbing excursions, choose any of Sinai's far-flung beaches to relax and recover – a good place to start is at any of the camps along the coast from **Nuweiba** to **Taba** (p490).

**In about two weeks, you could explore the underwater and desert landscapes of the Sinai Peninsula, the crossroads of Africa.**

MEDITERRANEAN  
SEA



## TAILORED TRIPS

### THE ANCIENT EGYPT TRAIL

If you're interested in the Pharaonic era, it greatly adds to the travel experience to tour Egypt in a chronological fashion.

Start in **Cairo** (p109), making Saqqara the first port of call to view the **Step Pyramid of Zoser** (p198), the prototype of all pyramids to come. Next, travel to Dahshur to view the **Bent Pyramid** (p205) and **Red Pyramid** (p205) before returning to Giza to see the final article in the **Great Pyramid of Khufu** (p149). Visit the **Egyptian Museum** (p183), focusing on the Old Kingdom galleries.

Your next stop should be **Luxor** (p239), moving into the era of the Middle and New Kingdoms. The temple complex of **Karnak** (p243) offers a history lesson set in stone. Cross to the West Bank, and explore the **Valley of the Kings** (p258) and the **Valley of the Queens** (p273), viewing the tombs in chronological order to witness the development of tomb painting. Before leaving the West Bank, visit **Medinat Habu** (p273) for the most complete expression of the Pharaonic golden age.

Travel north by train or taxi to Al-Balyana for **Abydos** (p233), the ancient burial ground of Osiris and home to the sublime **Temple of Seti I** (p234). Finally, return to Cairo and revisit the Egyptian Museum, this time to see the Middle and New Kingdom galleries.



### EGYPT FROM BELOW

Egypt isn't just about pyramids and deserts, and it only takes a quick plunge in the Red Sea to find yourself in another world.

If you're a certified diver, set aside as much time as possible to **dive** (p441) Egypt's incredible number and variety of sites. One of the best ways to do this is to explore the Red Sea on a **live-aboard** (p456), which allows you access to some of the country's most far-flung and pristine locales. The challenging dive spots in the **south** (p452) and **far south** (p453) have restricted access and see no more than a smattering of divers each year. If you don't have your licence, you can always spend a few busy days in **Dahab** (p476) studying up for your PADI certification (see p456). Don't leave before diving the infamous

**Bells & Blue Hole** (p447), a gaping underwater sinkhole that simulates the feeling of skydiving. Also check out the **Canyon** (p447), a long, narrow trench filled with corals and schools of exotic fish.

Regardless of where you base yourself, organise a trip to **Ras Mohammed National Park** (p449), the crown jewel of Egypt's underwater offerings. With so many spots, it can be difficult to choose a site, though you can't go wrong with **Shark Observatory** (p449). And don't miss the hulking mass that is the **Thistlegorm** (p451), regarded by some as the top wreck dive in the world.



## IMPRINTS OF ANCIENT CULTURE

With a rich and diverse heritage stretching back several millennia, Egypt is a treasure trove of ancient cultural sites that beckon to be explored.

It goes without saying that the **Pyramids of Giza** (p144) and the temples and tombs at **Luxor** (p250) are the best evidence of Pharaonic Egypt. However, don't let these sights overshadow all of the other cultures that have touched Egypt over the millennia.

Although its legendary library is no more, it's worth visiting **Alexandria** (p369), on the Mediterranean, if only to stand on the hallowed grounds of this fabled Graeco-Roman city. The Romans left their mark throughout the country, though perhaps nowhere as striking as in the oases of the **Western Desert** (p326), which prospered in Roman times as part of an expansive caravan network.

It should come as no surprise that various religions have their roots in the deserts of Egypt. The first sight that should immediately come to mind is **Mt Sinai** (p497), the holy mountain where it is said Moses received the Ten Commandments. Egypt also houses the holiest Coptic Christian sights, namely the **Red Sea Monasteries** (p418) of St Anthony and St Paul. These monasteries are the oldest in Egypt and the entire Christian world, and continue to function today as centres of worship.

Finally, don't forget the contributions of the Nubians, whose cultural influences are still felt today throughout the country. There is no better place to get a sense of their unique heritage than at the **Nubia Museum** (p302) in Aswan.



# The Authors



## MATTHEW D FIRESTONE

**Coordinating Author, Cairo, Egyptian Museum, Around Cairo, Suez Canal, Red Sea Coast, Diving the Red Sea, Sinai**

Matthew trained as an anthropologist and epidemiologist, though he abandoned a promising academic career in favour of spending his youth living out of a backpack. With his best explorer's hat and hiking boots on hand, Matthew blazed a trail across the Middle East in the footsteps of Indiana Jones. Although a brief excursion to Petra failed to reveal the final location of the Holy Grail, Matthew's travels brought him from the depths of the Red Sea to the heights of Mt Sinai. He may not have found eternal life but at least he found a bit of adventure – and a whole lot of sand.



## MICHAEL BENANAV

**Western Desert**

Michael cut his adventure-travelling teeth in Egypt back in 1998, and his experiences were so bizarre he figured he'd better start writing about them. Since then, he's authored the highly praised books *Men of Salt: Crossing the Sahara on the Caravan of White Gold*, for which he joined a working camel caravan on its mission schlepping salt to Timbuktu; and *Joshua & Isadora: A True Tale of Loss and Love in the Holocaust*, which took him through the vodka-soaked villages of rural Ukraine. He also writes and photographs for the *New York Times* and other publications. When he's not in some remote nook of Asia or Africa, he can often be found walking in the hills behind his home in northern New Mexico.



## THOMAS HALL

**Alexandria & the Mediterranean Coast**

After a childhood in Mexico, Brazil, and the suburban Chicago of *Risky Business*, Tom attended the University of California, San Diego, and most likely graduated with Literature and Writing degrees. After ingloriously eking out a living as a trivia writer and musician, he moved to San Francisco and failed to strike it rich in the internet gold rush, though he made up for it with voracious consumption of vegetarian burritos. Spending 18 months in Egypt, Tom became a connoisseur of seriously good *sheesha* and learned to appreciate *fuul* and *ta'amiyya*. After working for Lonely Planet in Oakland and Melbourne, Tom now lives in London. This his first travel writing gig for Lonely Planet.

### LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

Why is our travel information the best in the world? It's simple: our authors are passionate, dedicated travellers. They don't take freebies in exchange for positive coverage so you can be sure the advice you're given is impartial. They travel widely to all the popular spots, and off the beaten track. They don't research using just the internet or phone. They discover new places not included in any other guidebook. They personally visit thousands of hotels, restaurants, palaces, trails, galleries, temples and more. They speak with dozens of locals every day to make sure you get the kind of insider knowledge only a local could tell you. They take pride in getting all the details right, and in telling it how it is. Think you can do it? Find out how at [lonelyplanet.com](http://lonelyplanet.com).



**ANTHONY SATTIN** *Cruising the Nile; Nile Valley: Beni Suef to Qena; Nile Valley: Luxor; Nile Valley: Esna to Abu Simbel*

Anthony's highly acclaimed books include *The Pharaoh's Shadow*, a travel book about Egypt, and *The Gates of Africa*, an account of the search for Timbuktu. His latest book describes the winter that Florence Nightingale and Gustave Flaubert spent on the Nile. Anthony is a regular contributor to the *Sunday Times* and *Condé Nast Traveller* and his work has also appeared in *Vanity Fair*, *GQ* and a range of other publications. He has appeared in many television documentaries and presents features for BBC radio. He is the editor of Lonely Planet's *A House Somewhere: Tales of Life Abroad* and has contributed to Lonely Planet's *Morocco* and *Algeria* guidebooks.

## CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

**Dr Joann Fletcher** wrote the Pharaonic Egypt chapter and several boxed texts. Fascinated with Egypt since she was a small child, Joann Fletcher first visited the country in 1981 and this confirmed her decision to make it her career. A degree in Egyptology was followed by a PhD in the same subject and as a research and teaching fellow at the University of York, where she teaches Egyptian archaeology, she undertakes scientific research on everything from mummification to ancient perfumes. She is the Egyptologist for several UK museums and designed the UK's first nationally available Egyptology qualification. Having excavated at a number of sites in Egypt, including the Valley of the Kings, Joann regularly appears on TV, has contributed to the BBC History website and has written a number of books. When in Egypt she stays with her Egyptian family on Luxor's West Bank, or otherwise is at home on the Yorkshire coast or in Normandy.

**Dr Caroline Evans** wrote the Health chapter. Having studied medicine at the University of London, Caroline completed general practice training in Cambridge. She is the medical adviser to Nomad Travel Clinic, a private travel-health clinic in London, and is also a GP specialising in travel medicine. Caroline has acted as expedition doctor for Raleigh International and Coral Cay expeditions.