

## Into Culture

### Egypt

*Home to two of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World*



### Ancient Cities

### Cairo

The heart of Egypt for more than 1000 years, Cairo demonstrates the dichotomy of all things Egyptian. It's in Cairo where the medieval world and the contemporary western world come together in a confusion of earthen houses and towering modern office buildings, of flashy cars and donkey-drawn carts. Nobody really knows how many people live in Cairo, but estimates put it at about 16 million, and the city's many squatter camps and slums alone accommodate around 5 million people.



**Islamic Cairo** which is no more Islamic than the rest of the city, is the old medieval quarter and stepping into its neighbourhoods is like moving back six or seven centuries. This is the most densely populated area of Egypt, and probably of the whole of the Middle East. Districts like Darb al-Ahmar are full of tiny alleyways, mud-brick houses, food hawkers, goats, camels and donkeys. The streets are lined with mosques and temples, and the air is filled with the pungent smells of turmeric and cumin, animals and squalor.

**Mosque of Ibn Tulun**, one of Cairo's highlights, dates back to the 9th century and the city's oldest intact and fully functioning Islamic monument; the 15th-century **Mosque of Qaitbey**, is considered to be the jewel of Mamluk architecture. **Al-Azhar Mosque** is the keystone of Islam in Egypt. The **Citadel**, an awesome medieval fortress that was the seat of Egyptian power for 700 years, has three major mosques and several museums.

**Coptic Cairo** was originally built as a Roman fortress town. Pre-dating the founding of Islamic Cairo by several hundred years, it was home to one of the world's first Christian communities and is also a holy place for Jews and Muslims. The sole remaining section of the **Fortress of Babylon** includes two towers, which were built in AD 98 and originally overlooked an important port on the Nile before the river changed course. The **Coptic Museum** at the foot of the towers explores Egypt's Christian era from the years 300 to 1000. The stunning collection includes religious and secular art, stonework, manuscripts, woodwork, glass and ceramics.



**Giza** is on the west bank of the Nile and takes in an 18km (11 miles) swathe that includes the Great Pyramids. The pyramids are **one of the seven wonders of the ancient world**, and despite the crowds that visit every year they are still a truly overwhelming sight. They have survived the rise and fall of great dynasties and conquerors and share the flat desert that surrounds with the Sphinx and a number of smaller pyramids and temples.

Cairo has various precincts with cheap tourist accommodation and places to eat, but central Cairo is popular with budget travellers, particularly Midan Orabi and Midan Talaat Harb.

## Luxor

Built on the site of the ancient city of Thebes, Luxor is one of Egypt's prime tourist destinations. People have been visiting the magnificent monuments of Luxor, Karnak, Hatshepsut and Ramses III for thousands of years. Feluccas and old barges shuffle along the Nile between the luxury hotel ships of the Hilton and Sheraton that cruise to and from Cairo and Aswan.



## Luxor Temple

Was built by Pharaoh Amenhotep III (1390-1352 BC) on the site of an older temple built by Hatshepsut and added to by Tutankhamun, Ramses II, Nectanebo, Alexander the Great and various Romans. Excavation work has been under way since 1885.



*Amun; worshipped at the  
Temples of Karnak and Luxor*

## Temples of Karnak



They are a spectacular series of monuments that were the main place of worship in Theban times. They can be divided into the Amun Temple Enclosure, which is the largest; the Mut Temple Enclosure on the south side; and the Montu Temple Enclosure. The lonely statues of the Colossi of Memnon are the first things most people see when they arrive on the West bank, though the Valley of the Kings, including the spectacular tombs of Nefertari and Tutankhamun, are the big attraction

## Alexandria



The mighty Macedonian Alexander the Great came to Egypt in 331 BC after conquering Greece and selected a small fishing village on the Mediterranean coast to establish his new capital, Alexandria. The city is oriented around Midan Ramla and Midan Saad Zaghoul, the large square that runs down to the waterfront. Alexandria once had a great library that contained more than 500,000 volumes, and at its peak the city was a great repository of science, philosophy and intellectual thought and learning.

## Graeco-Roman Museum

The museum contains relics that date back to the 3rd century BC. There's a magnificent black granite sculpture of Apis, the sacred bull worshipped by Egyptians, as well as an assortment of mummies, sarcophagi, pottery, jewellery and ancient tapestries. Another highlight is one of the few historical depictions of the **Pharos (marble lighthouse) of Alexandria, one of the Seven Wonders of the World.**



*"The jackal" - god of death and mummification*

## Roman Amphitheatre

This is the only one in Egypt and it was rediscovered in 1964. It s 13 white marble terraces are in excellent condition and excavation work is still under way, although the dig has shifted a little to the north of the theatre.

## Pompey's Pillar

A massive 25m (82ft) pink granite monument measuring 9m (30ft) around its girth. The pillar should rightfully be called Diocletian's Pillar, as it was built for the emperor in AD 297. It was the only monument left standing following the violent arrival of the Crusaders around 1000 years later.

## Catacombs of Kom ash-Shuqqafa

These are the largest known Roman burial site in Egypt, and consist of three tiers of burial tombs, chambers and hallways. The catacombs were begun in the 2nd century AD and were later expanded to hold more than 300 corpses. There's a banquet hall where the grieving would pay their respects with a funeral feast.

## Cleopatra's Palace

The palace is situated under the sea bed off Alexandria. Columns were found in 1998 and recently archaeologists raised a beautiful statue of Isis from the depths. Cleopatra's Library was destroyed by the Crusaders.



## Port Said

Situated on the northern entrance to the Suez Canal on the Mediterranean coast, Port Said is a very young city by Egyptian standards. It was founded in 1859 by the ruler Said Pasha, when excavations began for the **Suez Canal**. The original settlement was established on land reclaimed from Lake Manzela and the city sits on an isthmus connected by causeways to the mainland. Ferries cross **Lake Manzela** to **Al-Matariyya** and across the canal to **Port Fouad**. Unlike many of Egypt's other Mediterranean towns, Port Said does not get overrun with local tourists seeking sun and sea. It's an unusual destination by Egyptian standards, with 1900 s colonial architecture and several good museums and gardens.

## Aswan



Aswan, Egypt's southernmost city, has long been the country's gateway to Africa. The prosperous market city straddles the crossroads of the ancient caravan routes, at the 'other' end of the Nile, not far above the Tropic of Cancer. In ancient times it was a garrison town known as **Swenet** (meaning 'Trade') and it was also important to the early Coptic Christians. The main town and temple area of

Swenet were located on  
**Elephantine Island** in the  
middle of Nile.

## Tombs of the Nobles

These are well worth a visit and a highlight is the **Nubian Museum**, showcasing history, art and Nubian culture from the prehistoric to the present. The Nile is glorious here as it makes its way down from massive **High Dam** and **Lake Nasser** - watching the feluccas glide by as the sun sets over the Nile is an experience you're unlikely to forget

# FESTIVALS / EVENTS

The Islamic (or Hejira) calender is a full 11 days shorter than the Gregorian (western) calender, so public holidays and festivals fall 11 days earlier each year.

**Ras as-Sana** is the celebration of the new Islamic year.

**Moulid an-Nabi** celebrates the Prophet Mohammed's birthday around May. These celebrations include parades in the city streets, with lights, feasts, drummers and special sweets.

**Ramadan** is celebrated during the ninth month of the Islamic calender (presently around November). It was during this month that the Quran was revealed to Mohammed and out of deference the faithful take neither food nor water until after sunset each day.

**Eid al-Adha** is the time of the pilgrimage to Mecca and each Muslim is expected to make the pilgrimage (haj) at least once in a lifetime. Streets are decorated with coloured lights and children play in their best clothes. The ritual of Mahmal is performed in each village as passing pilgrims are given carpets and shrouds to take on their journey. This all takes place around February.

