

## The Great Sand Sea of Egypt

When you think of taking a holiday to Egypt you tend to think about Cairo and the Great Pyramids and Luxor, Temple of Karnak and the Valley of the Kings – of Egyptian Pharaohs and their Queens lying undiscovered in hidden tombs. Or maybe you think of the Sinai with its clear blue seas perfect for diving or snorkelling, or walking in the footsteps of Moses up Mount Sinai. But there is an area of Egypt that is not visited by many tourists but which covers two thirds of Egypt's land mass and is just as spectacular as the popular sites. This area is the western desert, also known as the Great Sand Sea.



A camel's eye view of the desert

I had been fascinated by Egypt since I was a child, and watching films like Agatha Christie's *Death on the Nile* and later *The Mummy* only made it seem more exotic. Therefore when I finally decided to visit Egypt I tucked a desert extension on to the end of my trip without too much thought other than extending my holiday. I took in the usual sites of ancient Egypt such as the pyramids and sphinx; sailed down the Nile in a Felucca (which was fantastic) visiting ancient temples and monasteries on the way; then wandered around the Valley of the Kings gazing in awe at the tombs, but the place I found the most inspiring and incredible was the 5 days spent travelling through the Western desert oases.

The desert is an amazing place temperatures can reach up to 120F in the day and then drop to freezing at night. It is also a constantly shifting place. The shape and movement of the sands is controlled by the winds, this means that some dunes can move as much as 100ft a year and others are almost stationary. This makes travelling desert areas very difficult as roads can disappear covered by sand and geographical points move.



Just me and the desert

These oases are fed by underwater lakes now thought to be finite, not fed by underground rivers, with a lifespan of between 100 and 700 years.

The Western Desert Oases are made up of 5 oases all of which are very different and surrounded by different types of desert. Christian in its early history, it later fell to the Muslims and Berbers before becoming part of Egypt in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. One of the most enduring pieces of history occurred in 523 BC when the Persian king Cambyses sent an army across the desert to make war on Siwa. That army disappeared and nothing was heard of them again, legend had it that a sandstorm wiped out everyone in the army.



Sand dunes – are they covering up a lost army?

This part of Egypt is very different to the rest, particularly regarding tourism which has only been going since 1980 and is still in its infancy. You won't find any plush hotels, fancy restaurants or indeed much alcohol here but what you will find are great falafels (little chickpea rissoles), no hassle and very few tourists and you also get a police escort.

The oasis you visit first will depend on where you are coming from. If you are starting at Luxor, as I was then your first oasis will be El Kharga.

## The El Kharga and Dakhla Oases

My first experience of the western desert was driving from Luxor with its masses of tourists, touts, noise and bustle, into literally nowhere. Once you drive out into the Great Sand Sea there really is nothing but sand, rock and more sand – apart from these oases.

This area of the desert is characterised by gravelly sand and table top rocks punctuated with golden dunes (stereotypical desert dunes) and moving sand, which I experienced firsthand when we had a toilet stop somewhere on the road to Kharga. Girls to one side, boys the other – off to find a suitable sand dune. Not a usually a problem, you get used to it when travelling in sparsely populated areas, but this time the wind was fierce and blowing sand everywhere. What fun that was crouching down in the sand. Then on the walk back to the minibus, my friend lost her shoe down a hole – it just swallowed it up. We searched for around 10 minutes but to no avail the shoe was gone. Back at the minibus anyone who had been outside was covered in a layer of sand. It was everywhere – and I mean everywhere! In my scalp, and every inch of skin and even down my bra – how did it get there? I was not looking forward to my time in the desert – particularly the part where I was sleeping under the stars. Fortunately that was the one and only time the wind was that strong and I didn't have to remove sand from my underwear again.



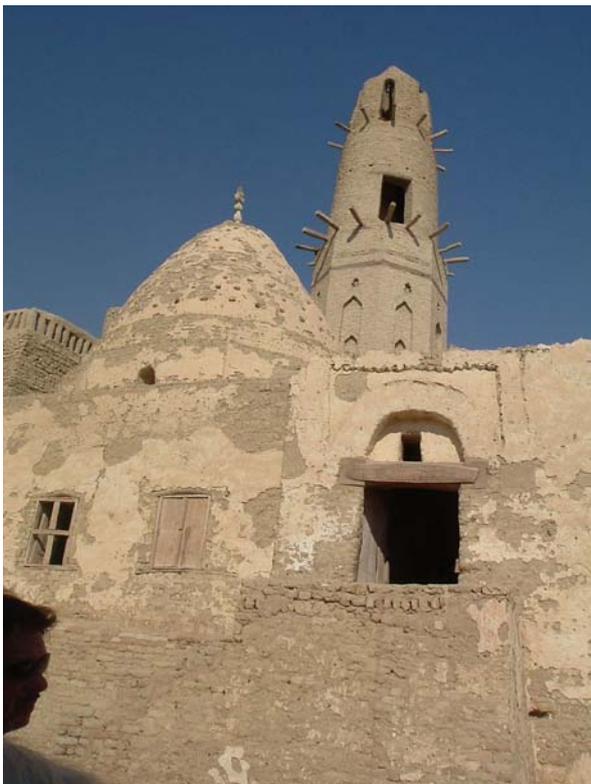
Camel riding at sunset

The southern part of the desert has a number of unique temples and ruins that are very different to the Pharaohic Egypt. The first of these is the Temple of Hibis dating from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC which is the only sign of Persian rule in Egypt. Nearby is one of the best preserved Christian necropolis in the world – Al Bagawat, dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries and best known for their Coptic frescoes including Moses leading the Jews out of Egypt. (The Coptic Church was an Egyptian Christian offshoot which broke away from the established church in the 451 AD.) As well as this there is a ruined Christian village and Roman tombs, bones and bits of china are strewn around along with the snakes and scorpions. In another country where ancient ruins are less plentiful these would be in a museum. If you are really lucky (or unlucky!) the guard will ask if you want to see 'Shouf bebe?' Then go into a hole in the ground and bring out a mummified baby, which is quite unsettling. I don't know how long it has been their but it seems a bit gruesome, but also fascinating to think of life and death going on that long ago.



Al Bagawat

Further on is the old town of Al-Qasr which has changed very little from medieval times. With a population of around 700, the town was built from Roman ruins and has narrow covered streets dating from as far back as 924 AD. The town is still occupied but most of the old town has been abandoned for more modern buildings. One of the most beautiful buildings is the mosque which dates back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. It has a three-story mud-brick minaret, 21 meters high, and wooden lintels decorated with inscriptions from the Koran at the entrances.



The mosque at Al-Qasr

### **Farafra and the White and Black Deserts**

Moving on northwards the desert scenery is completely different to the southern area, changing from gravelly sand to white stone. The geology here is spectacular with extraordinary moonscapes and wind eroded chalk outcrops in the shapes of mushrooms, pyramids and icebergs. The Farafra

oasis, which is the nearest town to the White Desert, is the most attractive of the oasis, as well as the most western and least populated, this town is situated at the eastern edge of the Great Sand Sea and mentioned in the inscriptions of Rameses II.



The mushroom

Camping out in the White Desert was an incredible experience I would not have wanted to miss. This part of the desert is white coloured with huge chalk formations carved by sandstorms eroding the rock and leaving strange shapes; you can have loads of fun deciding what they look like – mushrooms, hats, dogs and birds; some of them look very eerie and alien particularly at dusk and dawn, in fact the whole desert has a weird otherworldly look. White rocks change colour during sunrise and sunset from pinks, purples oranges and gold. Sleeping under the stars was amazing – it never really gets dark, like when it's snowing and even though it's the night time everything is still really bright.



Camping in the White Desert

We leave the White Desert and travel on to the Black Desert. This part of the desert is windblown and volcanic and is named after the iron ore deposits shot out of the volcanic peaks which litter the area. After the wonderful light colour of the White Desert the Black Desert is slightly disappointing in that it isn't really very black. Even so, the contrast is huge since there the ground is brown-orange and the ground is scattered with little black-coloured stones, not at all what you would expect of a desert.

In between the White and the Black Deserts is the Crystal Mountain. It is not really a mountain at all more of a rock or ridge, but the rock is definitely made of crystals. There are crystals all over the ground and in the rocks, some as big as footballs, some of these crystals look like they could power the Starship Enterprise! The origin of this Crystal Mountain is interesting. The hill was opened during works at the road from Farafra to Bahariya by chance and destroyed in part. The material was installed in the road.



Crystals at the Crystal Mountain

### **The Bahariya Oasis**

The Bahariya oasis is the oasis nearest to Cairo. This oasis has isolated springs on a wind eroded sandstone plane; it is believed that Alex the Great stopped here on his way to Siwa. This oasis contains one of the most important finds in Egypt since Tutankhamen's tomb, the Golden mummies. The Valley of the Golden Mummies is a huge burial site discovered in 1996 when an antiquities guard was riding his donkey in the Bahariya Oasis. The donkey's leg stumbled in a hole, which turned out to be the roof of an undiscovered tomb. Further excavation revealed a burial site containing the remains of many people from different backgrounds which continues to this day. Around 250 mummies have already been found and it is thought that there are as many as 10,000 buried at the site, which includes the ruin of a temple to Alexander the Great, who is believed to have stopped here on his way to Siwa. The museum contains a number of the most important and impressive mummies found on the site, some of which are gilded, covered with a very thin layer of gold. Despite it being such an important site the museum is very low-key, don't expect to find air conditioning this is a very basic place; which makes it all the more interesting when you consider the importance of the finds.



Rolling down the sand dunes

So if you are thinking of visiting Egypt don't miss the Great Pyramid or Tutankhamen's treasure in the museum in Cairo. Make sure you see the Valley of the Kings and temples at Abu Simbel; but equally don't overlook the Western desert. It is a fantastic place of vast emptiness and ever changing landscapes. Here you can ride a camel out into the desert to sleep under the stars and it seems like you are the only people for miles around. You can travel in ever changing landscapes from golden sand dunes to black mountains. There is nowhere like it on earth.