

EGYPT

Were it not for the river Nile, Egypt would be just another piece of the Sahara Desert. The river produces a strip of greenery, a few miles wide, down the middle of the country, where almost all Egyptians live. The Nile is one of the three longest rivers in the world. It arises in the mountains of East Africa, and flows northwards into the Mediterranean, the final quarter of its length being in Egypt. Since the river flows downhill (obviously!), it flows from Upper Egypt, in the south, to Lower Egypt, in the north, which can be rather confusing! Most tourists visit Egypt either for the antiquities or for the Red Sea beaches; many tour companies combine both in a single tour. This article will deal only with historical Egypt.

The time of the pharaohs in Egypt ran from 3,000BC to 30BC. During this period, Egypt vacillated between being two separate countries (Upper and Lower Egypt) and a single 'unified' country. Most of the great archaeological sites date from three periods in which the country was unified—the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms. Although historic sites can be found throughout the country, the most important, and those most likely to be included in tourist itineraries, are based on three cities: Cairo, Luxor, and Aswan.

Cairo has the oldest and most spectacular of the antiquities—the pyramids, dating back to about 2,500BC. They are located in Giza, a western suburb of Cairo. The pyramids are a 'must' for anyone interested in the history of the country, and are truly spectacular! Although thousands of tourists visit the pyramids and hundreds of vendors try to relieve them of their cash, it is still possible to appreciate the majesty of these structures, as seen in the photograph, and to marvel at how they were constructed. The three pyramids at Giza are the largest, but there are many other pyramids throughout Egypt, some of which are also worth visiting. The other 'must' for visitors to Cairo is the Egyptian Museum, which contains a treasure trove of archaeological finds. Best known, of course, are the treasures from the tomb of Tutankhamen, discovered almost intact in 1922. The museum itself is a little 'old fashioned', but it is due to move into new premises, outside the city and close to the pyramids. Cairo was built near to Memphis, the old capital of Lower (northern) Egypt, but unfortunately almost nothing now remains of this old capital.

Luxor is about 450 miles south of Cairo, and is built on the site of Thebes, the capital of Upper (southern) Egypt. In contrast to Cairo and Memphis, Luxor boasts an embarrassment of riches, most of which date from the New Kingdom, around 1,500BC. The ancient Egyptians believed that just as the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, the east bank of the Nile is for the living, and the west bank for the dead. Thus the east bank at Luxor houses the spectacular temples of Karnak and Luxor, which were used for day-to-day worship, whereas the west bank houses the tombs, and the temples used to prepare the dead for mummification. The Valley of the Kings contains about 100 tombs of different pharaohs, although only a handful can be visited. There is also a Valley of the Queens, the less-visited but beautifully decorated tombs of the artisans, and the spectacular funerary temple of Hatshepsut, a woman who reigned as pharaoh, in defiance of the 'men only' rule!

Most 'Nile cruises', start from Luxor and travel south as far as Aswan. Cruising is a very good way to see the villages, the countryside and the ordinary lives of the people living along the Nile, and there are also a number of interesting temples to visit.

Aswan is a pleasant, fairly modern city—which is crowded with cruise boats, and the sailing boats known as 'feluccas'. Just south of the town is the Aswan High Dam, completed



The pyramids of Giza, to the west of Cairo

in 1970, which created the huge Lake Nasser. Several temples were rescued from the rising waters, including Phylae, close to Aswan, and Abu Simbel, which is a three-hour bus ride to the south (although flights are also available). The road to Abu Simbel crosses the desert, which has a charm of its own, and the temple is truly spectacular. No photograph can convey the sheer size of the statues, which were originally carved in a cliff-face, but have now been relocated above the waterline.



Feluccas on the Nile

Two aspects of life in the Middle East, which are ‘foreign’ to most English people, are tipping (‘baksheesh’) and bartering. A trip to the ‘loo’ almost always involves paying the attendant, typically one Egyptian pound—worth about 10p! However, this can be a problem if the bank has given you nothing

smaller than 100 Egyptian Pounds! A good tour guide will provide guidance on bartering, and most things can be obtained for a fraction of the original asking price!

If you have not been to Egypt before, it is probably best to book a tour, and to let the tour company take care of the logistics. An alternative (particularly if you are not planning on taking a Nile cruise) would be to book your own flight and hotel, and to use one of the many local travel firms for any excursions you would like to make. Most Egyptian tour guides speak good English and are extremely knowledgeable. Despite the recent political problems in Egypt, it remains one of the most interesting countries in the world for a visit.



The temple of Ramses II at Abu Simbel

Mike Whittle

After the uprising in January, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office issued a warning against travel to Egypt. This has now been relaxed, although caution is still advised.