Egypt

Sinai
(Chapter)

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Coverage includes: Ras Sudr, Al-Tor, Ras Mohammed National Park, Sharm El-Sheikh & Na’Ama, Nabq Protectorate, Dahab, Ras Abu Gallum Protectorate, Nuweiba, Taba and St Katherine Protectorate.

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Sinai

Why Go?
Rugged and starkly beautiful, the Sinai Peninsula’s vast and empty desert heart has managed to capture imaginations throughout the centuries. It’s coveted for both its deep religious significance and strategic position as a crossroads of empires. Prophets and pilgrims, conquerors and exiles have all left their footprints on the sands here.

A springboard to the underwater wonders of the Red Sea, Sinai’s seaside resorts serve travellers with a medley of sun-drenched holiday fun that’s a world apart from the rest of Egypt. Step away from the buzz of the coast, however, and you’ll find Sinai’s true soul. Here amid the red-tinged, ragged peaks and endless never-never of sand, the Bedouin continue to preserve their proud traditions while dealing with the endless march of progress. On a star-studded night, surrounded by the monstrous silhouettes of mountains, you’ll realise why Sinai continues to cast a spell over all who visit.

Best Places to Eat
» Wadi Itlah garden lunch (p434)
» Seabride Restaurant (p412)
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Best Places to Stay
» Sawa Camp (p426)
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When to Go
Dahab

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Mar In the desert spring’s colourful flurry of life carpets the sands.
Apr–May Celebrate all things Sinai at the Dahab Festival.
Oct Sneak in some autumn sun along the coast.
Sinai Highlights

1. Dive into Ras Mohammed (p393), an underwater fantasia of coral mountains and ghostly shipwrecks.
2. Follow in the footsteps of prophets and pilgrims on the time-worn rock stairs of Mt Sinai’s Steps of Repentance (p432).
3. View one of the world’s most important collections of early religious art and manuscripts at St Katherine’s Monastery (p428).
4. Snorkel the Lighthouse Reef (p408) then relax with a beer, sheesha and new friends at a waterfront restaurant.
in the backpacker vortex of Dahab
5. Escape the crowds to laze on a beach, with a blissful to-do list of nothing, at one of the **beach camps north of Nuweiba** (p426)
6. Discover the majestic beauty of Sinai’s vast desert interior on a **trek or camel safari** (p409 and p432) into the craggy mountains with a Bedouin guide
7. Explore the plunging chasm of South Sinai’s **Blue Hole** (p410)
**History**

Some 40 million years ago the African and Arabian continental plates began to move apart, creating the relatively shallow (95m deep) Gulf of Suez and the much deeper (1800m) Gulf of Aqaba. The Gulf of Aqaba, which varies from 14km to 25km in width, is part of a rift (a crack in the top layer of the earth) that extends 6000km from the Dead Sea, on the border between Israel and Jordan, through the Red Sea, Ethiopia, Kenya, and all the way down to Mozambique in southern Africa.

In Pharaonic times the quarries of Sinai provided great quantities of turquoise, gold and copper. The importance of this ‘Land of Turquoise’ also made it the goal of empire builders, as well as the setting for countless wars. Acting as a link between Asia and Africa, it was of strategic value – many military forces marched along its northern coastline as they travelled to or from what is now known as Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

For many people, Sinai is first and foremost the ‘great and terrible wilderness’ of the Bible, across which the Israelites journeyed in search of the Promised Land, having been delivered from the Egyptian army by the celebrated parting of the Red Sea that allowed the ‘Children of Israel’ to safely gain access to the dry land of Sinai. It was here that God is said to have first spoken to Moses from a burning bush and it was at the summit of Mt Sinai (Gebel Musa) that God delivered his Ten Commandments to Moses:

Tell the children of Israel; Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians... If ye will obey my voice and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine. And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. And Mount Sinai was altogether in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and the whole mount quaked greatly... And the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai...and called Moses up to the top of the mount... And God spoke all these words, saying, I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

*Exodus 19:4-6; 19:18-20:3*

Early in the Christian era, Sinai was a place for Christian Egyptians to escape Roman persecution. Monasticism is thought to have begun here as early as the 3rd century AD, with most hermits settling in the caves of Wadi Feiran, on the assumption that Gebel Serbal, located nearby, was in fact the ‘Mountain of God’. By the time Emperor Justinian founded a monastery at the foot of Mt Sinai in the 6th century, it had been decided that this was the mountain on which God had spoken. For centuries thereafter, the peninsula became a place of pilgrimage. It later became one of the routes taken to Mecca by Muslim pilgrims. Until recently the majority of its inhabitants were Bedouin, the only people who are capable of surviving in the harsh environment of the peninsula.

In recent years Sinai has become the focus of development and ‘reconstruction’ in much the same way that the New Valley in the Western Desert was during the 1970s and 1980s, when landless fellahaen (peasant farmers) from an overcrowded Nile Valley were encouraged to move to the oases. The government has built a new pipeline, called the Al-Salam Canal, to bring fresh water from the Suez Canal to various areas of North Sinai that have been targeted for resettlement.

Tourism, too, has brought great changes. Surveys estimate that Sharm el-Sheikh has seen a tenfold population increase in the past 15 years, while the small village of Dahab has grown into a sprawling beach-front tourist town; business in both towns is dominated by tour operators from Cairo and the Nile Valley. For years Sinai’s Bedouin have complained of marginalisation and ill-treatment by the police as they become a minority in their native land. Since the 2011 revolution, tentative steps towards more inclusion have been made but it remains to be seen if any future government can manage to mend the bridge of mutual mistrust that has, up to now, dominated dialogue between Cairo and Sinai’s traditional inhabitants (see also boxed text p433).

**Climate**

Sinai’s climate is extreme: on one hand it can get very hot, so remember always to carry water, use copious amounts of sunblock and wear sensible clothes to avoid sunburn (wearing a T-shirt while snorkelling is advisable). On the other hand, while summer temperatures can climb to 50°C, it gets very cold at night, and the mountains can
be freezing during the day. Come prepared with warm clothing, especially if you’ll be trekking or climbing Mt Sinai.

**Dangers & Annoyances**

Because of the peninsula's unique position between cultures and continents, plus its mountainous terrain and — in more recent times — its tourist masses, Sinai has traditionally had a higher security profile than other parts of the country.

In recent years, the region of Sinai has been thrust into the international spotlight following a string of high-profile bombings. On 7 October 2004, three bomb attacks in Taba killed 34 people and injured more than 150. On 23 July 2005, a series of coordinated bombings in the tourist market of Sharm el-Sheikh killed 88 people and injured close to 200, becoming the deadliest terrorist action in the country's history. In 2006 Dahab became the latest victim of terrorist activity when on 24 April three bombs exploded, killing 23 people and injuring more than 75.

Security concerns have again been highlighted in the region since the revolution of 2011, although much of the activity has occurred far from any tourist centre. Between February and November 2011 a gas line in the far north of Sinai (which supplies Israel and Jordan with Egyptian natural gas) was blown up eight times by unidentified gunmen. On 30 July 2011, members of local Islamist group Takfir-wal Hijra attacked the police station in the northern city of Al-Arish, leaving seven dead and dozens injured.

Tensions along the border Egypt shares with Israel and the Palestinian territory of Gaza also hit a new high on 18 August 2011 when militants (claimed by Israeli authorities to have crossed into Israel from Gaza through Sinai) carried out a series of deadly attacks near the Israeli border town of Eilat. During the ensuing gun battle, when Israeli forces chased militants along the border close to Taba, two Egyptian border guards were killed mistakenly by Israeli troops and four others injured (who all later died in hospital). The incursion caused widespread outrage in Egypt and led to Israel allowing Egypt to move more troops into Sinai to help maintain security.

In a separate issue, in February 2012 two kidnapping incidents involving tourists occurred on the road between St Katherine and
Sharm el-Sheikh. The hostages were taken by Bedouin tribesmen in a high-profile attempt to pressurise the Egyptian government to release jailed Bedouin. In both instances, the hostages were released unharmed after a short period of negotiation.

It is impossible to offer anything other than blind speculation regarding the possibility of a future terrorist attack in Sinai. With that said, it’s worth checking your embassy’s travel advisory to get an update on the situation before making any plans. However, it’s important to remember that the overwhelming majority of travellers to Sinai enjoy their visits without incident.

On a different note, travellers should be aware that while bikinis are fine for the beach, Egypt is a conservative country and walking around town in your swimwear is likely to offend a great number of local people (and attract a lot of unwanted attention). Likewise it should be noted that although topless sunbathing seems to be de rigueur for some tourist groups in Sharm el-Sheikh, you should keep in mind that it is illegal here, as in the rest of Egypt.

### Getting There & Away

Sinai’s international air hub is at Sharm el-Sheikh, which receives regular flights from Europe in addition to local flights. There is also an international airport in Taba, though it receives only occasional charter flights. For overland travel, the peninsula is linked to the mainland by the Ahmed Hamdi Tunnel, and by the Mubarak Peace Suspension Bridge, both of which connect to main arteries to Cairo. There are regular buses connecting Cairo and other destinations with the major towns on the Sinai Peninsula.

### Getting Around

Because of Sinai’s rugged landscape, paved roads link only the permanent settlements, and public transport is not quite as regular as elsewhere in Egypt. The bus network between the main South Sinai coastal towns is decent, but to other destinations there are only a couple of connections each day – and sometimes fewer. Servees cars are also in short supply and are only a popular means of transport in northern Sinai (primarily along the route connecting Rafah and Al-Arish with Suez and Cairo).

If you are driving, you will need to exercise caution at all times. Stick to tracks when going off the road, as there are still mines left over from the wars with Israel. When at the wheel in winter, remember that it rains with some frequency in Sinai, and flash floods often wash out paved roads, particularly around Wadi Feiran.

### Sinai Coast

A barren coastline of extraordinary beauty, the Sinai coast is the meeting spot of choice for the world’s political leaders, a booming package-tourism destination, and nirvana for the members of the international diving fraternity. Over the past several millennia some of human history’s most significant events have played out against these isolated shores, and today the region remains sacred to all the world’s major monotheistic religions. Of course, this doesn’t alter the simple fact that the majority of international travellers make regular pilgrimages to the coast for its isolated beaches, superb coral reefs and unique Bedouin culture.

### Ras Sudr

Ras Sudr (or simply Sudr) was originally developed as the base town for one of Egypt’s largest oil refineries, though its coastline and proximity to Cairo have spurred its transition into a resort area for wealthy Cairene families. With near constant winds, blowing at mostly force five or six, Sudr also enjoys a fine reputation among windsurfers. The town centre lies just off the main highway while to the south and north lay a handful of ageing resorts interspersed with holiday villas.

This is also a good base from which to explore the local hot springs. To the north of Ras Sudr is Ain Musa (Spring of Moses), said to be where Moses – on discovering that the water was too bitter to drink – took the advice of God and threw a special tree into the springs, miraculously sweetening the water. Unfortunately, however, only one of the 12 original springs still exists, and is now sadly filled with litter. The waters of Hammam Fara’un (Pharaoh’s Bath), 50km south of Ras Sudr, are used by local Bedouin as a cure for various ailments. Women who want to take a dip here should do so clothed.

One of the most famous places for wind- and kitesurfing, Moon Beach (☎340 1500; www.moonbeachretreat.com; 7-/14-night half-board package per person £310/460, 7-/14-day kit hire £150/240, 7-day windsurfing course incl kit hire £120; ✿) has beachfront bungalows with all the trimmings. Additionally, there’s a professionally staffed and stocked wind- and kitesurfing centre and school.
Nightly rates and shorter-stay packages are available.

East Delta has a bus station along the main road about 500m south of the main junction. Buses to Cairo (E£25 to E£30, two to three hours) depart at 7.30am, 2pm and 4pm. A taxi from the bus station in Ras Sudr to Moon Beach costs about E£30.

Al-Tor

Al-Tor, also known as Tur Sinai, has been a significant port since ancient times, though today it primarily serves as the administrative capital of the South Sinai Governorate. With stiff and constant breezes, Al-Tor has been trying in recent years to establish itself as a wind- and kitesurfing destination.

National Bank of Egypt has a branch with an ATM; it's in the town centre near the post office. If you've overstayed your welcome in Egypt, you can extend your visa at the Mogamma, the large administrative building on the main road in the town centre.

About 5km from town are some hot springs known as Hammam Musa (admission E£25), which tradition holds to have been one of the possible stopping points used by Moses and the Israelites on their journey through Sinai.

The focal point of wind- and kitesurfing in Al-Tor is the Moses Bay Hotel (077 4343; www.oceansource.net/hotel; 7-/14-night half-board package, incl equipment rental, per person €435/756; ), located approximately 3km from town. Moses Bay has its own private stretch of sand, pleasant rooms, a restaurant, and a wind- and kitesurfing centre.

The East Delta bus station is along the main road at the northern edge of town opposite the hospital. Buses depart from 7am onward throughout the day to Sharm el-Sheikh (E£15 to E£20, two hours). From the bus station, you can hire a pickup for E£10 to take you to Moses Bay Hotel.

Ras Mohammed National Park

About 20km west of Sharm el-Sheikh on the road from Al-Tor lies the headland of Ras Mohammed National Park (admission per person E£5, plus per vehicle E£5; 8am-5pm), named by local fishermen for a cliff that resembles a man's profile. The waters surrounding the peninsula are considered the jewel in the crown of the Red Sea. The park is visited by more than 50,000 visitors annually, enticed by the prospect of marveling at some of the world's most spectacular coral-reef ecosystems, including a profusion of coral species and teeming marine life. Most, if not all, of the Red Sea's 1000 species of fish can be seen in the park's waters, including sought-after pelagics, such as hammerheads, manta rays and whale sharks.

Ras Mohammed occupies a total of 480 sq km of land and sea, including the desert in and around the ras (headland), Tiran Island, and the shoreline between Sharm el-Sheikh harbour and Nabq Protectorate.

Activities

If you're planning to dive in Ras Mohammed, you will need to arrive via a boat tour or a live-aboard, both of which typically depart from Sharm el-Sheikh or Dahab. For more information on dive operators in the area see p398 for Sharm el-Sheikh and p408 for Dahab.

If you arrive at the national park by private car, it's possible to hike to a variety of wilderness beaches and go snorkelling on offshore reefs – you will need to bring your own equipment.

At the park's visitors centre, a pink trail leads to Khashaba Beach and a camping area. Yellow arrows lead to the sandy beaches and calm waters of Marsa Bareika, excellent for snorkelling and safe for children. Blue arrows take you to Main Beach, which gets crowded with day visitors but remains one of the best places to see vertical coral walls. Brown arrows lead to Aqaba Beaches, which border the Eel Garden, named after a colony of garden eels 20m down. Just beyond here, orange arrows lead to the Shark Observatory, a clifftop area where you can sometimes see sharks as they feed on Ras Mohammed's rich offerings. The red arrows lead to Jolanda Bay, another beach with good snorkelling, and green arrows lead to the Mangrove Channel and Hidden Bay and to Old Quay, a spectacular vertical reef teeming with fish and accessible to snorkellers.

Sleeping

Camping is permitted in designated areas, with permits (£5 per person) available from the entrance gate. You'll need to bring all supplies with you; the nearest shops are in Sharm el-Sheikh. If you camp, respect the
environment and clean up. In particular, don’t bury toilet paper or rubbish, as the relentless winds here mean that nothing stays under the sand for long. Camp rules are strictly enforced by rangers, and if you’re caught violating them, you will be fined and possibly even prosecuted.

**Information**

You’ll need your passport to enter the park. Visitors on Sinai-only permits cannot go to Ras Mohammed overland as it is beyond the Sharm el-Sheikh boundary, but should not have any problem on dive-boat trips – check with the dive clubs if you have any doubts.

The entrance to the park is about 20km from the reefs. A visitors centre (10am-sunset Sat-Thu) with a restaurant is clearly marked to the left of the main access road in an area known as Marsa Ghoslane.

**Getting There & Around**

If you don’t have a car, you can hire a taxi from Sharm el-Sheikh to bring you here, but expect to pay at least ££150 for the day. If you don’t mind company, the easiest option is to join one of the many day tours by jeep or bus from Sharm el-Sheikh, most of which will drop you at the
beaches and snorkelling sites. Alternatively, divers are often brought in by boat from tourist centres on the Red Sea.

To move around the park you’ll need a vehicle. For conservation reasons, it’s forbidden to leave the official tracks.

## Sharm el-Sheikh & Na’ama Bay

Sharm el-Maya, does not always reflect this serene underwater beauty.

Commonly described as Egypt’s answer to Las Vegas, Sharm draws in legions of European holidaymakers every year on all-inclusive sun-and-sea tour packages. Over the past decade the march of concrete sprawl along the coastline to cater for these crowds has been relentless.

Sharm has both adoring fans and harsh critics, and opinions tend to fall solely in either camp. Defenders of the town, particularly resident expats and package travellers, claim that Sharm simply is what it is, namely a pleasure-seeking European enclave on the edge of Sinai. It is also touted as being a great destination for families who want to bring the little ones to Egypt for a beach holiday.

On the other hand, critics accuse Sharm of being sterile, and claim that its airbrushed facade covers up some serious environmental

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**HISTORY’S FOOTPRINTS**

Sinai’s rugged expanses are dotted with traces of early settlements and pilgrimage routes. One of the most impressive sites is **Serabit al-Khadim**, a ruined Pharaonic temple surrounded by ancient turquoise mines and starkly beautiful landscapes. Despite the remoteness of the location, turquoise was mined here as far back as the Old Kingdom. The temple itself dates back to the 12th dynasty and is dedicated to the goddess Hathor. Beside it is a New Kingdom shrine to Sopdu, god of the Eastern Desert. Throughout the temple’s many courts, inscriptions list the temple’s benefactors, including Hatshepsut (1473–1458 BC) and Tuthmosis III (1479–1425 BC). It is thought to have been abandoned during the reign of Ramses VII (1136–1129 BC).

Serabit al-Khadim can be reached via an unsignposted track just south of the coastal settlement of Abu Zenima or, more interestingly, from a track branching north off the road running east through Wadi Feiran via **Wadi Mukattab** (Valley of Inscriptions), which itself is well worth a visit. Here Sinai’s largest collection of rock inscriptions and stelae, some dating back to the 3rd dynasty, give further evidence of ancient turquoise-mining activities. Unfortunately, many of the workings and stelae were damaged when the British unsuccessfully tried to revive the mines in 1901.

Heading inland from Serabit al-Khadim, another track takes you through the colourful wadis of **Gebel Foga** to the cliffs that edge Gebel ‘et-Tih and the **Forest of Pillars**, a naturally occurring phenomenon accessible with 4WD and camel via a long track.

All of these destinations require guides and a 4WD. The most straightforward way to visit is to arrange a jeep trip with any of the tour agencies in Dahab or Moon Beach resort in Ras Sudr.

If you’re travelling in your own vehicle, you can head into the village of **Sheikh Barakat** and get a guide: coming from Ras Sudr, follow the marked track that leads off into the desert, just south of Abu Zenima, for about 39km. When you see a white dome on your right, take the track to your left. After about 3km you’ll come to Sheikh Barakat, where you can camp and organise a guide to take you the remaining 7km to the trail leading up to Serabit al-Khadim. At the end of this you’ll need to park your vehicle and climb for about an hour. The track up the mountain is steep at times and involves a bit of scrambling but can be handled by anyone who is reasonably fit. Coming from Wadi Feiran, you can negotiate for a guide in the village of Feiran.
degradation which has led to pressing issues of sustainability. Independent travellers who are turned off by gated resorts would be wise to skip Sharm, passing through only en route to the more low-key and backpacker-friendly town of Dahab.

Activities
Snorkelling & Diving
It’s something of a tragedy that Sharm’s truly exquisite diving has been overshadowed by unfettered tourist development. However, offshore dive sites in both Sharm and the adjacent Ras Mohammed National Park are easily accessible by live-aboards, or even from boat trips departing from Dahab. For more information on diving in the Red Sea, see p36.

Snorkelling in the waters around Sharm is excellent. While there are some easily accessed reefs in central Na’ama Bay, it’s better to make your way to the more impressive Near Garden and Middle Garden, even more beautiful Far Garden, or Ras Um Sid reef, near the lighthouse at Sharm el-Sheikh, which is known for its fan corals and plethora of fish, although the small beach is parcelled up between several resorts and can get quite crowded. Many of the dive sites further afield are also suitable for snorkellers and access can be arranged by joining a dive boat at most local dive clubs.

A small selection of Sharm’s most popular dive sites are given below, listed from north to south.

Jackson Reef  
(Map p38; location: Straits of Tiran) Home to sharks and large pelagic fish, Jackson Reef is crowned with the remains of a Cypriot freighter, the Lara, which ran aground here in 1985. Depth: surface to over 40m; rating: intermediate to advanced; access: boat.

Thomas Reef  
(Map p38; location: Straits of Tiran) The smallest, but easily the most spectacular of the Tiran reefs, Thomas is home to steeply plunging walls that are lined with soft coral, schooling fish and patrolling sharks. Depth: surface to over 40m; rating: advanced; access: boat.

Gardens  
(Map p396; location: btwn Shark’s & Na’ama Bays) At the perennially popular Gardens there are actually three sites in one. Near Garden is home to a lovely chain of pinnacles, Middle Garden features a sandy path leading to a scenic overlook, and Far Garden is home to ‘The Cathedral’, a colourful overhang in deep water. Depth: surface to over 40m; rating: intermediate; access: shore or boat.

Ras Za’atir  
(Map p38; location: south lip of the mouth of Marsa Bareika) Marking the start of the Ras Mohammed wall, Ras Za’atir has a series of small caves and overhangs where black coral trees flourish. Depth: surface to over 40m; rating: intermediate; access: boat.

Jackfish Alley  
(Map p38; location: just south of Ras Za’atir) A comparatively shallow site that is good for a second or third dive, Jackfish Alley has two
enormous caves filled with shoaling glass-fish. Depth: 6m to 20m; rating: intermediate; access: boat.

**Shark & Jolanda Reefs**

(Map p38; location: southern tip of Ras Mohammed)

This two-for-one special is among the most famous dives in the Red Sea, and rated one of the top five dives in the world – strong currents take divers on a thrilling ride along sheer coral walls, through vast schools of fish and eventually to the remains of the *Jolanda*, a Cypriot freighter that sank in 1980. Depth: surface to over 40m; rating: advanced; access: boat.

**Dunraven**

(Map p38; location: southeast tip of Sha'ab Mahmud) The *Dunraven* sunk in 1876 on her way from Bombay to Newcastle. Today the wreck is encrusted in coral and home to various knick-knacks including china plates, metal steins and jars of gooseberries and rhubarb among the detritus. Depth: 15m to 28m; rating: intermediate; access: boat.

**Shark’s Bay Diving Club**

(off Map p396; ☎ 360 0942; www.sharksbay.com; Shark’s Bay Umbi Diving Village, Shark’s Bay) Shark’s Bay is a Bedouin-run centre with years of experience and its own house reef.

**Emperor Divers**

(Map p402; ☎ 360 1734; www.emperordivers.com; Sharm–Na’ama Bay rd, Na’ama Bay) A branch of the five-star outfit offers courses aimed at families of all ages.

**Oonas Dive Centre**

(Map p396; ☎ 360 0581; www.oonasdiveclub.com; Na’ama Bay) A popular centre at the north-easter end of Na’ama Bay.

**Water Sports**

Most major hotels offer a range of water sports, including sailing lessons, windsurfing, parasailing, pedalos, banana boats and glass-bottom boats. Most hotels also have beach access – either their own stretch of waterfront, or by agreement with another resort. Check when booking, as the beaches of some hotels are fairly distant (up to 10km) from the hotel itself and can only be accessed via shuttle. There is a narrow stretch of public beach diagonally opposite Hilton Fayrouz Resort on Na’ama Bay, but it is so crowded with rental chairs that it is difficult to see the sand. The other stretch of public beach is in Sharm al-Maya but note that women swimming here in bikinis or other skimpy attire are likely to feel uncomfortable.

**Camel Rides**

Camel rides to ‘traditional Bedouin villages’ can be easily arranged with most hotels.

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**SHARM EL-SHEIKH: THE LAY OF THE LAND**

Most resorts are clustered along or just inland from the beach at Na’ama Bay. If you enjoy being in the centre of the action and don’t mind the nightclub noise, central Na’ama Bay – consisting of a beachfront promenade and a pedestrians-only area lined with hotels, restaurants and shops – is the most convenient base. The further away from this central strip you go, the quieter things become: most of the resorts lining the coast north of Na’ama Bay are comparatively tranquil upmarket retreats with their own patch of sand and easy taxi access to the central area.

Sharm al-May, about 6km southwest of Na’ama Bay, centres on a large, walled market area known as Sharm Old Market, with a selection of inexpensive eateries. A large section of the Old Market area was badly damaged in the bombings of July 2005 and has been heavily rebuilt.

Spread out on a clifftop above Sharm al-May is the administrative area of Hadaba, which is rimmed by a barren network of long, treeless avenues lined with primarily mid-range resorts. To the southeast of the administrative area is Ras Um Sid, with an agreeable stretch of coastline, a lighthouse and a row of upmarket hotels.
Expect to pay US$40 to US$60 and to find yourself in the midst of a large group.

Horse Riding
Several top-end hotels, including Sofitel Sharm el-Sheikh (Map p396; ☎360 0081; www.sofitel.com; Na‘ama Bay), offer horse riding from about US$30 to US$60 per hour.

Tours
Almost all travel agencies and large hotels organise jeep or bus trips to St Katherine’s Monastery (p428), and to desert attractions such as the Coloured Canyon (p409). However, most of the guides are Nile Valley dwellers, not Bedouin, and the groups are often large. Better, more sensitive trips can be arranged from Dahab.

Black Jack Bike
CYCLING
(☎0122 370 3116; www.blackjackbike.com) This small company organises highly recommended half-day (five-hour) mountain-bike tours (bikes are European standard) into the Nabq Protectorate. Tours cost €50 and include pickup from hotel, helmet, water and a support van. It also offers tailor-made tours for people interested in full-day or multiday trips. Call or book online.

Sleeping
Sharm el-Sheikh and the surrounding area have one of the greatest concentrations of hotels in Egypt, but budget accommodation places are few and far between, with the all-inclusive resort being the standard rather than the exception. For anyone who is serious about pinching their pennies, it’s probably wise to continue on to Dahab.

Be advised that the hotel scene in Sharm is changing rapidly and prices tend to be subject to wild fluctuations depending on the number of tourists in town. Despite the high rack rates, most of the resorts sell their rooms at much cheaper prices as part of all-inclusive packages. Cheaper rates for most are always available if you book in advance.

Sinai Old Spices
B&B $$
((off Map p396; ☎0122 680 3130; www.sinaialdspices.com; Roissat area; s/d £150/240; *) Hidden behind a terracotta wall, this charmingly dinky B&B serves up bundles of quirky style using locally inspired architecture. The individually decorated rooms all come with kitchenette and fabulous modern bathrooms. It’s a £40 taxi ride from Sharm itself so won’t suit everyone, but for those seeking a peaceful retreat from the bright lights of Na‘ama Bay it’s a perfect choice. Phone beforehand to arrange a pickup, or get directions, as it’s tricky to find.

Camel Hotel
HOTEL $$
(Map p402; ☎360 0700; www.cameldive.com; King of Bahrain St; r from €40; ⭐⭐⭐) Attached to the dive centre of the same name, Camel Hotel is one of the best places to stay if diving is your main Sharm agenda. Despite being in the heart of Na‘ama Bay, the spacious, modern rooms are gloriously quiet (thanks to soundproof windows) so you’re guaranteed a good night’s sleep.

Sofitel Sharm el-Sheikh
RESORT $$$
(Map p396; ☎360 0081; www.sofitel.com; s/d €98/128; ⭐⭐⭐⭐) This whitewashed hotel terraces majestically down towards the sea like a sultan’s palace from a children’s fairy tale. Despite its name, the Sofitel offers an incredibly sophisticated resort experience to the guests privileged enough to be staying here.

Shark’s Bay Umbi
BEACH CAMP $$
(off Map p396; ☎360 0942; www.sharksbay.com; s/d huts without bathroom €17/20; s/d beach cabins €24/35; s/d room €35/45; ⭐️⭐️) This long-standing Bedouin-owned place is a tumble of cute chalets that flow down to the beach. Pine beach cabins are spick and span, if a bit of a squeeze, and there are larger rooms built into the cliff above. If you’re really strapped for cash, spartan huts (with just mattress and mosquito net) are up on the clifftop. To reach the camp, just tell the taxi driver ‘Shark’s Bay Umbi’; expect to pay about £25 from Na‘ama Bay and £35 to £45 from the bus station.

Four Seasons
Sharm el-Sheikh
RESORT $$$
(off Map p396; ☎360 3555; www.fourseasons.com/sharmelsheikh; r from US$325; ⭐⭐⭐⭐) Dripping elegance at every turn, this palatial resort is the height of secluded luxury built around palm-fringed courtyards and manicured gardens overlooking the Straits of Tiran. Huge rooms blend modern design seamlessly with Arabesque accents boasting intricate lattice woodwork and ornate bronze fixtures. Of course, you’re going to need a small fortune to spend some time here, but it’s difficult to put a price on over-the-top indulgence.
**Sleeping**
- **Ritz Carlton Sharm el-Sheikh**
  - RESORT $$$
  - (Map p396; ☏ 366 1919; www.ritzcarlton.com; Ras Um Sid; r from US$170; ✨✨✨) Towering Egyptian-temple columns, lashings of glass and grand Louis XV furniture welcome you into the sweeping foyer. Unfortunately, after this onslaught of uncompromising luxury, the rather bland (though supremely comfortable) rooms are a bit of a let-down.

- **Tropicana Tivoli**
  - HOTEL $$
  - (Map p400; ☏ 366 1384; www.tropicanahotels.com; Hadaba; s/d from US$70/80; ✨✨) A well-maintained midrange winner with tidy rooms (including kitchenette) set around a large pool, plus helpful staff. A good option for families on a strict budget.

- **Oonas Hotel**
  - HOTEL $$
  - (Map p402; ☏ 360 0581; www.oonasdiveclub.com; Na’ama Bay; s/d €45/60; ✨✨) This combo dive centre and hotel has bland but well-equipped rooms on a prime spot along the promenade. Accommodation is a bargain if booked in conjunction with a dive package.

- **Hyatt Regency Sharm el-Sheikh**
  - RESORT $$$
  - (Map p396; ☏ 360 1234; www.sharm.hyatt.com; r/ste from US$185/350; ✨✨✨) With grand villa styling, superior service and vast landscaped gardens, the Hyatt is a serene retreat. Standard rooms are classically decorated and many have sweeping sea views.

- **Ghazala Gardens**
  - HOTEL $$
  - (Map p402; ☏ 360 0150; http://redseahotels.com; Sharm–Na’ama Bay rd; r from US$100; ✨✨) All glitzy water features and Moroccan styling, the friendly Ghazala has weathered the storm of terrorism (it was the target of the massive truck bomb that claimed 45 lives in 2005) and is as popular as ever. Although it’s not actually on the beach, guests can simply cross the road and access the hotel’s sister property, the Ghazala Beach.
Hilton Sharm el-Sheikh
Fayrouz Resort
(Map p402; ☏ 360 0137; www.hiltonworldresorts.com; Sharm–Na’ama Bay rd; s/d US$80/100; ⭐⭐⭐) This family-friendly resort is in prime position along the promenade. The bungalows are large and light-filled though pale in comparison to the shows of wealth found at competing hotels.

Amar Sina
Hotel
(Map p396; ☏ 366 2222/9; www.minasegypt.com; Hadaba; r E£300; ⭐⭐⭐) Decked out like an Egyptian village, this midranger offers brick-domed rooms complete with plenty of kitsch styling, furniture sourced from the 1970s and dinky balconies.

Coral Hills Resort
Hotel
(Map p396; ☏ 366 5807; www.coralhillsresorts.com; Hadaba; s/d US$35/50; ⭐⭐⭐) The rooms may be characterless and full of tired, dated furniture but for this price who’s complaining. The large pool area is a highlight.

Youth Hostel
Hostel
(Map p400; ☏ 366 0317; City Council St, Hadaba; dm E£65; ⭐) The only attraction of this shabby affair is that it’s the cheapest place to stay in the area and the management is extremely sweet.

Eating

It’s a shame most tourists on all-inclusive packages never stray from their resort, as Sharm dishes up a glutton’s paradise of enticing restaurants spanning the culinary globe. You should prepare for a wallet-bashing, however, as eating out here is by no means cheap (and be aware that most high-end restaurants add a service tax of 10% and a government tax of 12% on top of your bill) – still, the foodie manna of multiple cuisines on offer here makes splurging on a slap-up meal well worth the extra expense.

Fairuz
Lebanese $$$
(Map p402; King of Bahrain St; mezze dishes E£18; mains E£80-100; ⭐⭐⭐) Lebanese is flavour of the month in Sharm and this Levantine restaurant will lead you on a mouth-watering journey through the subtle flavours of the Middle East. Forgo the main-course menu completely and concentrate on the mezze (starter-sized dishes), which are the heart of any Lebanese dining experience. Choose a bundle of mezze such as batingan bi laban (aubergine in garlicky yoghurt), makinek (spicy sausages) and loubieh (a green-bean stew) to share with delicious fresh-from-the-oven bread. The great-value mezze set menu (E£105 per person, minimum two people) is the best way to sample a full array of flavours.

Abou El Sid
Egyptian $$$
(Map p402; Sultan Qabos St; dishes E£30-100; ⭐⭐⭐) This branch of the famous Zamalek restaurant now flies the flag for Egyptian cuisine in Sharm, and is one of the few places in town where you can experience the full gamut of Egypt’s national dishes. Specialties such as molokhiyya (stewed leaf soup), stuffed pigeon and kirsha (spicy lentil stew) are menu highlights. Don’t skip the mezze selection as it’s full of delightfully tasty and tangy surprises.

El-Masrien
Egyptian $$$
(Map p400; dishes E£25-40) El-Masrien’s continued success is due to the fact it delivers succulent kebabs and kofta (mincemeat and spices grilled on a skewer) that perfectly hit the spot, without hiking its prices to try and compete with fancier Sharm restaurants. It’s an old-fashioned neighbourhood place with tables pouring out onto the pavement, perfect for Sharm Old Market people-watching.

Safsafa Restaurant
Seafood $$$
(Map p400; dishes E£20-50; ⭐⭐⭐) This tiny, cheerful restaurant manages to serve up fresh seafood platters, tagen (stews cooked in a deep clay pot) and pasta at budget-friendly prices.

Pomodoro
Italian $$$
(Map p402; King of Bahrain St; dishes E£40-80; from 6.30pm) Hearty portions of Italian classics keep this place full of customers most evenings. Risottos, pasta and a fair whack of seafood are all featured on the menu, as well as favourites like pepper steak.

Tandoori
Indian $$$
(Map p402; Camel Hotel, King of Bahrain St; dishes E£40-125; from 6.30pm) The courtyard of the Camel Hotel is home to what many consider Sharm’s best Indian food, including a selection of tandoori dishes and an excellent dhal makhani (dish of black lentils and red kidney beans).

Tam Tam
Egyptian $$
(Map p402; Na’ama Bay promenade; dishes E£20-60) Great for those who want to sample a range of Egyptian fare. This laid-back waterfront restaurant is the place to while away a
few hours while relaxing on cushions overlooking the beach and puffing on a sheesha.

**Little Buddha**  
**ASIAN $$$**  
(Map p402; Sultan Qabos St; mains E£45-115; * ) One of the most popular Asian restaurants in Sharm, Little Buddha serves excellent Asian fusion cuisine alongside a fresh and varied sushi bar. Later in the night it turns into a loungey bar.

**Sala Thai**  
**ASIAN $$$**  
(Map p396; Hyatt Regency Sharm el-Sheikh; dishes E£40-120; * ) Delicious Thai food (fiery curries and delicately spiced noodle dishes) and pleasing aesthetics (teak decor and an outdoor terrace) are yours to enjoy at this comfortable spot overlooking the sea.

**Al-Fanar**  
**ITALIAN $$$**  
(Map p396; Ras Um Sid; dishes E£40-150; 10am-10.30pm; * ) All nooks and crannies of scattered Bedouin-style seating, seafront vistas

and decent Italian (vast pasta and pizza menu) dining. Al-Fanar (named after its lighthouse location) is a well-deserved up-market Sharm dining favourite.

**Koshary El-Sheikh**  
**EGYPTIAN FAST FOOD $**  
(Map p400; meals E£5-10) Egypt’s favourite carbohydrate-fuelled feast, *kushari* (a blend of pasta, rice, lentils and fried onion smothered in a tomato sauce) is dished up here.

**Self-Catering**

There are several small but well-stocked supermarkets in Sharm Old Market, including **Supermarket El-Baraka** (Map p400) and the large **Sharm Express** (Map p400). Beer and wine can be bought at **Al-Ahram Beverages** (Map p400). There are also numerous supermarkets in central Na’ama Bay, including the large and well-stocked **Carrefour Supermarket** (Map p402; 9am-1am) and **Panorama Supermarket** (Map p402; 9am-2am).
Entertainment

Considering Egypt is a fairly conservative country that typically shuns alcohol and excess pleasures of the flesh, Sharm el-Sheikh can either be a shock to the senses or a welcome relief – depending on your own vices, of course. The entire charade may be wholly un-Egyptian, but after a few beers and a couple of uninhibited dancing sessions, fun is usually had by all.

Camel Roof Bar
(Map p402; Camel Hotel, King of Bahrain St, Na’ama Bay; 3pm-2.30am) Camel is a favourite among dive instructors for its relaxed, casual vibe. This is the optimal place to start off the evening, especially if you’ve been diving all day and are looking to swap stories from down under.

Bus Stop Lounge
(Map p402; King of Bahrain St, Na’ama Bay; 4pm-3am) This popular disco-bar is known for its good music and up-for-it, fun-loving crowd. There’s a pool table for those who don’t feel like getting on the dance floor, and happy hour from 8pm to 9pm gets you two-for-one beers and half-price cocktails.

Little Buddha
(Map p402; Sultan Qabos St, Na’ama Bay; 11pm-3am) With dim lights, big cushiony chairs and a mellow ambience, the bar at this Asian fusion restaurant gets going after the kitchen closes.

Pacha
(Granery p402; www.pachasharm.com; King of Bahrain St, Na’ama Bay) The hub of Sharm’s nightlife, Pacha goes wild pretty much every night of the week. Watch for Pacha’s advertising around town to see what’s playing.

Pirates’ Bar
(Map p402; Hilton Fayrouz Reort, Na’ama Bay) A cosy pub where divers congregate for an early-evening drink or bar meal. Happy hour is from 5.30pm to 7.30pm.

Hard Rock Café
(Map p402; Sultan Qabos St, Na’ama Bay) A late-night disco-bar with dancing, and one of Sharm’s most popular nightspots. Dancing starts at midnight and goes until the wee hours of the morn’.

Harry’s Pub
(Map p402; Marriott Beach Resort, Na’ama Bay) This English pub has a large selection of beers on tap and occasional special nights with unlimited draught beer at a very reasonable price.

La Folie Bar
(Map p396; Iberotel Lido, Na’ama Bay; 2pm-2am) For a more sedate start to your evening, head to this quiet, pleasant bar on the water overlooking the bright lights of Na’ama Bay.

Mexicana Bar
(Map p402; Na’ama Bay Hotel, Na’ama Bay) A small and sometimes happening bar close to the promenade, this is a great place to down a few bowls of nachos followed by a decent margarita.
Information

Dangers & Annoyances
In July 2005, three terrorist bombs exploded in Sharm el-Sheikh, killing 88 people and injuring over 200. The worst damage was in the Sharm Old Market area and near Ghazala Gardens hotel in Na’ama Bay. Security in Sharm was beefed up considerably in the aftermath and the town has not been targeted since.

Sharm is generally considered to be a safe destination, and – barring another major attack – it is a relaxed and hassle-free destination, even if you’re travelling with young children.

For an overview of the history of terrorism in Sinai, see p391.

Emergency

Ambulance (123)
Tourist police Hadaba (Map p400: 366 0311); Na’ama Bay (Map p402: 360 0554, 366 0675; booth next to Marina Sharm Hotel)

Internet Access

Many hotels have internet access and there are internet cafes dotted around town, each charging between E£5 and E£10 per hour depending on your length of use. Many of the restaurants and hotels offer wi-fi (the luxury hotels usually charge for this service).

Tiba Net (Map p400; Sharm Old Market; 24hr)
Speed Net (Map p400; Sharm Old Market; 24hr)
Naama Internet (Map p402; Na’ama Centre, Na’ama Bay; noon-3am)

Medical Services

Omar & Omar Pharmacy (Map p402; 360 0960; King of Bahrain St, Na’ama Bay; 9am-1am)
Sharm el-Sheikh Hyberbaric Medical Center (off Map p396; 366 0922/3, 0122 212 4292; hyper_med_center@sinainet.com.eg; Sharm el-Sheikh; 24hr)
Sharm el-Sheikh International Hospital (Map p396; 366 0893/4/5; Sharm–Na’ama Bay rd, Sharm el-Sheikh; 24hr)
Sharm Medical Center (Map p396; 366 1744; Sharm–Na’ama Bay rd, Sharm el-Sheikh; 24hr) Next to the bus station.

Money

You will find ATMs every few metres in Na’ama Bay, including several in the Na’ama Centre (Map p402), as well as ATMs in the lobbies of all the larger hotels. Otherwise, all the major banks have branches in Hadaba.

Banque du Caire (Map p400; Hadaba) Has an ATM.

Commercial International Bank (Map p402; Na’ama Centre, Na’ama Bay; 9am-1pm & 6-10pm Sat-Thur, 10-11am Fri) Has an ATM.

HSBC (Map p402; 360 0614; Na’ama Centre, Na’ama Bay) Has an ATM.

National Bank of Egypt Hadaba (Map p400; Bank St; 8.30am-2pm & 6-9pm Sat-Thur, 9am-1pm & 6-9pm Fri). Na’ama Bay (Map p402) Both have an ATM.

Thomas Cook (Map p402; 360 1808; Gafy Mall, Sharm–Na’ama Bay rd, Na’ama Bay; 9am-2pm & 6-10pm) Just west of Sinai Star Hotel.

Western Union (Map p402; 364 0466; Rosseta Hotel, Na’ama Bay; 8.30am-2pm & 6-10pm Sat-Thur, 3-10pm Fri)

Post

Main post office (Map p400; Bank St, Hadaba)

Telephone

Most internet cafes allow you to dial internationally for E£4 to E£7 per minute.

Telephone centrale (Map p400; Bank St, Hadaba; 24hr).

Getting There & Away

Air

Sharm el-Sheikh Airport (360 1140, www.sharm-el-sheikh.airport-authority.com) is Sinai’s major travel hub. For domestic destinations EgyptAir (Map p400; 366 1056; www.egyptair.com; Sharm al-Maya; 9am-9pm) has several flights per day to Cairo and five per week direct to Luxor. For all other domestic destinations you usually have to change in Cairo. Prices fluctuate wildly depending on season. If you book in advance it’s sometimes possible to snag a ticket for less than US$100.

EasyJet (www.easyjet.com) operates daily flights to the UK and, if booked in advance, can be one of the cheapest ways to fly in or out of Egypt. BMI also offer flights (via Cairo) and Royal Jordanian has daily flights to Amman. There are also plenty of charter flights in and out of Sharm, which usually offer significantly cheaper fares. Even if you’re an independent traveller, it’s worthwhile seeing if you can book a seat on one of them.

Boat

The ferry service between Sharm el-Sheikh and Hurghada stopped operating in 2010. During the course of research for this book a new ferry schedule was announced but had yet to begin operation. The proposed schedule has departures for Hurghada at 5pm every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday (adult/child E£250/150, two hours). Enquire at any of the hotels and travel agencies in Sharm el-Sheikh for up-to-date information. You could also contact the
Sharm el-Sheikh Port Office (off Map p400; ☎ 366 0217; Sharm el-Sheikh Port).

Bus
The bus station (Map p396) is along the Sharm–Na'ama Bay road behind the Mobil petrol station. Seats on the buses to Cairo should be reserved in advance. Buy tickets from the following bus companies at the bus station.

Super Jet (☎ 366 1622, in Cairo 02-2290 9017) runs buses to Cairo (£85, six to seven hours) at 11am, 1pm, 3pm and 11.30pm. The 3pm service continues on to Alexandria (£110, eight to nine hours).

East Delta Travel Co (☎ 366 0660) also has buses to Cairo (£60 to £80) at 7.30am, 9.30am, 11am, 12.30pm, 2.30pm, 3.30pm, 8pm, 9.30pm, 11pm, midnight and 1am. All except the 11am, 2.30pm, 11pm and midnight services stop in Al-Tor (£11, one to two hours). There are daily buses to Suez (£80, six to seven hours) at 7am and 10am. Heading north there are buses to Dahab (£15 to £20, one to two hours) at 6am, 7am, 9am, 3pm, 5pm and 9pm; to Nuweiba (£25 to £30, two to three hours) at 9am and 5pm; and to Taba (£30 to £35, three to four hours) at 9am.

Getting Around
To/From the Airport
Sharm el-Sheikh International Airport is about 10km north of Na‘ama Bay at Ras Nasrany; taxis generally charge from £20 to £25 from the airport to Sharm or Na‘ama Bay. Prepare to bargain hard.

Bicycle
Standard and cross-country bicycles can be rented from many hotels. Black Jack Bike (☎ 0122 370 3116; www.blackjackbike.com) rents out European-standard mountain bikes for €22 per day (including helmet) and will deliver to your hotel door.

Car
Car-rental agencies in Na‘ama Bay include Avis (Map p402; ☎ 360 2400/0979; Sharm–Na‘ama Bay rd, Na‘ama Bay), just west of Carrefour Supermarket; Hertz (Map p396; ☎ 366 2299; Bank St, Hadaba) and Sixt Car Rental (Map p402; ☎ 360 0137; Hilton Fayrouz Resort). All charge about US$80 per day for a basic saloon, and US$120 and up for a roomier 4WD. Unlimited-kilometre arrangements generally require a minimum three- to four-day rental.

Microbus & Taxi
Blue-and-white minibuses regularly ply the stretch between central Na‘ama Bay and Sharm el-Sheikh. The fare is £2, though foreigners are often charged £5. Taxis charge a minimum of £10 between the two centres, and between Hadaba and Na‘ama Bay, and from £5 within Na‘ama Bay. Many of the hotels above Ras Um Sid have their own shuttles to Na‘ama Bay.

Nabq Protectorate
Thirty-five kilometres north of Sharm el-Sheikh is Nabq, the largest coastal protectorate on the Gulf of Aqaba. Named after an oasis that lies within its boundaries, Nabq straddles 600 sq km of land and sea between the Straits of Tiran and Dahab. Because it is less frequently visited than Ras Mohammed, Nabq is a good place to see Sinai as it was before the arrival of mass tourism.

There is a visitors centre (admission £5; ☎ 8am-5pm) located off the road leading from Sharm el-Sheikh past the airport and Ras Nasrany. Within the park itself, you’ll find several hiking trails, clearly marked snorkelling spots and designated camping areas.

Nabq’s main attraction is its mangrove forest, which runs along the shoreline at the mouth of Wadi Kid and is the most northerly mangrove stand in the world. Mangrove root systems filter most of the salt from seawater and help to stabilise shorelines, while also providing an important habitat for birds and fish. Just inland from the mangrove forest are the dunes of Wadi Kid, which are home to one of the Middle East’s largest stands of arak bushes (arak twigs were traditionally used by Bedouin to clean teeth). Gazelles, rock hyraxes and Nubian ibexes can be seen in the protectorate, as well as two villages of Bedouin from the Mizena tribe. Offshore there are rich reefs with easy access, although visibility can be poor because of sediment from the mangroves.

To visit Nabq, you’ll need a vehicle or will have to join an organised tour. Most hotels and resorts in Sharm el-Sheikh and Dahab offer safaris, both on the land and in the water. If you drive, remember that vehicles are strictly forbidden to leave the tracks.

Dahab
Low-key, laid-back and low-rise, Dahab continues its ongoing evolution into the Middle East’s prime beach resort for independent travellers. The startling transformation from dusty Bedouin outpost to spruced-up...
tourist village is not without its detractors, who reminisce fondly of the days when you dossed in basic huts by the shore. But for all the starry-eyed memories of ‘the good old days’, there are plenty of plusses that have come with prosperity. Diving is now a much safer and more organised activity thanks to better regulation of operators; the shoreside restaurants have calmed down their touting to become more friendly ‘hello’ than sales barrage; and it’s cleaner and much more part of the action as cheap rooms and herds of goats fossicking in the back alleys), many travellers plan a few nights here and instead stay for weeks. If Dahab is in your sights, be forewarned – after a few days of crystal-clear diving, desert trekking, oceanside dinners and countless sheesha sessions, you’re probably going to want to cancel the rest of your itinerary.

This is the one town on the south Sinai Peninsula where independent travellers are the rule rather than the exception and Dahab’s growth has not destroyed its budget-traveller roots. Reeled in by a fusion of hippy mellowness and resort chic (where good cappuccino and sushi are as much a part of the action as cheap rooms and herds of goats fossicking in the back alleys), many travellers plan a few nights here and instead stay for weeks. If Dahab is in your sights, be forewarned – after a few days of crystal-clear diving, desert trekking, oceanside dinners and countless sheesha sessions, you’re probably going to want to cancel the rest of your itinerary.

**Activities**

### Snorkelling & Diving

Other than just lounging around, snorkelling and diving are the most popular activities in Dahab. The best reefs for snorkelling are Lighthouse Reef and Eel Garden, both in Assalah. You can hire snorkelling gear from all the dive centres and many other places in Masbat for about £25 to £40 per day. Keep in mind that some of the reefs have unexpected currents – drownings have occurred in Dahab – so keep your wits about you.
An overview of some of the most popular diving sites – from north to south – is given below. Note that despite the intimidating reputation of the Canyon and Blue Hole dive sites as danger zones for careless divers, the tops of the reefs are teeming with life, making them fine snorkelling destinations too when the sea is calm. It’s easy to find half-day tours to both sites but watch for hidden ‘extras’, such as overpriced drinks and gear-minding fees at some of the cafes around the Blue Hole. Many dive centres also organise snorkelling and dive safaris to the nearby Ras Abu Gallum and Nabq protectorates, as well as overnights to Ras Mohammed National Park.

For an overview of diving in the Red Sea, see p36.

Canyon (Map p38; location: north side of Dahab) One of the area’s most popular dives, the Canyon is a long, narrow trench that runs perpendicular to the reef shelf, and is home to prolific hard and soft corals. Depth: 5m to 33m; rating: intermediate; access: shore.

Eel Garden (off Map p406; location: north side of Dahab) Eel Garden takes its name from the countless garden eels that carpet the sea floor. Other highlights include huge coral boulders and dense congregations of barracudas. Depth: 5m to 20m; rating: intermediate; access: shore.

Lighthouse (Map p406; location: Masbat) This sloping reef is home to a bounty of fish life and is Dahab’s main night-diving site. More experienced divers can descend to the sandy bottom where there’s a profusion of coral towers. Depth: 5m to 30m; rating: novice; access: shore.

Islands (Map p38; location: south side of Dahab) This underwater Alice in Wonderland-esque site offers an outstanding topography of coral alleyways, amphitheatres, valleys and gulleys. Depth: 5m to 18m; rating: novice; access: shore.

Umm Sid (Map p38; location: 15km south of Dahab) An impressive entrance through a wide corridor carved into a steeply sloping reef is a highlight of this dive. Further down you’ll find table corals and two enormous gorgonians. Depth: 5m to 35m; rating: intermediate to advanced; access: shore.

Gabr el-Bint (Map p38; location: 25km south of Dahab) This dive features a dramatic seascape highlighted by a 60m wall cut by numerous chasms, faults and sandy ravines. If you access the site by land the journey combines a 4WD trip and a Bedouin-led camel convoy. Depth: 10m to 30m; rating: intermediate; access: boat/camel.

Dive Operators

Red Sea Relax Dive Centre (\[364 1309; www.red-sea-relax.com; Red Sea Relax, Masbat) Long-standing five-star PADI centre with excellent reputation.

Poseidon Divers (\[364 0091; www.poseidondivers.com; Crazy Camel Camp, Mashraba) Award-winning PADI centre that consistently gets recommended by travellers.

Big Blue Dive Centre (\[364 0045; www.bigbluedahab; Mashraba) Popular and friendly five-star PADI centre with a good reputation.

Dive Urge (\[364 0957; www.dive-urge.com; Sharia al-Melal, Assalah) Five-star PADI centre with commendable environmental credentials.

One Toke Over the Line

Dahab’s hippy roots and backpacker-friendly atmosphere often go hand in hand with drug use. At some point here, you will likely be offered marijuana or hashish (and possibly harder stuff), and you may see people around you openly using drugs. Some misinformed travellers have the attitude that toking is legal – it’s not at all, and the penalty for being caught with drugs is harsh.

Dahab veterans may fondly recall smoking on the beach in broad daylight, but these days police patrol with drug-sniffing dogs and are quick to make a bust. Please heed our advice – if you’re going to indulge, do it discreetly, either under cover of night or hidden away from prying eyes and sensitive nostrils. Of course, given the state of Egyptian prisons, it’s probably better to just hold off on the herb until you get home.
**Sinai Coast to Tours**

**Sinai Dive Centre**

(364 0320; www.nesima-resort.com; Nesima Resort, Mashraba) A reputable club owned by local environmental activist and veteran diver Sherif Ebeid.

**Camel & Jeep Safaris**

Dahab is one of the best places in Sinai to arrange camel safaris into the dramatic mountains lining the coast, especially the spectacular Ras Abu Gallum Protectorate. When choosing who to go with, make sure that the tour operator works with the Bedouin. Unfortunately, local communities have been excluded from the tourist industry, which tends to be dominated by migrants from the Nile Valley. Make sure that your camel driver registers with the police before beginning the safari. Itineraries – and as a result, prices – are generally custom-designed, but expect to pay around £200 per person for an evening trip into the mountains with dinner at a Bedouin camp, and from about £300 to £400 per person per day for a safari including all food and water.

One of the most popular jeep safaris is a trip to **Coloured Canyon**, northwest of Nuweiba. The canyon derives its name from the layers of bright, multicoloured stones that resemble paintings on its steep, narrow walls, and is magnificently beautiful. As the canyon is sheltered from the wind, the silence – assuming you aren’t there with a crowd – is one of its most impressive features. Unfortunately, the canyon has become overtouristed in recent years, and many operators have also begun offering trips to other sites where the rock formations are equally impressive and the sense of wilderness more intact. All of the hotels, dive centres and travel agencies offer jeep Safaris, though prices vary considerably depending on the time of year, your destination and the size of your party – don’t be afraid to shop around and bargain hard.

**Water Sports**

There’s no beach to speak of in Assalah itself – instead the rocky coastline leads straight out onto the reef. For the golden sands after which Dahab was named, you’ll need to head down to the lagoon where the resorts are clustered. Most resorts offer beach-use day access starting from £50.

Kayaks can be rented through **Red Sea Relax** in Masbat. At the resorts around the lagoon you can hire pedalos and kayaks as well as take windsurfing and kitesurfing courses. The main windsurfing centre is **Club Mistral** (364 1577; www.club-mistral.com), which operates out of its office at the Hilton Dahab Resort. **Happy Kite** (0109 224 4822; www.happy-kite.com) offers kitesurfing courses (from beginner to advanced) from its base nearby.

**Tours**

All the tour operators in Dahab offer tours to Mt Sinai and St Katherine’s Monastery (usually leaving late at night to climb the mountain for sunrise, and returning midday). Nearly all also offer one-day, whirlwind trips to either Petra in Jordan or Jerusalem in Israel. Unless you are really strapped for time it’s usually best to make your own independent arrangements for Jordan and Israel. If you do decide to take one of these international tours, be aware that most of your time will be spent travelling there and back with very little time at the actual sights. For more information on how to get to Petra see p421.

**Desert Riders**

(0111 515 4411; Sharia al-Fanar, Masbat) Most tours do a loop circuit from town taking in one of either Wadi al-Rayyan or Wadi Con-

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**DAHAB: THE LAY OF THE LAND**

There are two parts to Dahab: the small and newer area of Dahab City to the south, with a smattering of resort hotels at the lagoon, the bus station, post and phone offices, and a bank; and Assalah, which runs along the beach and is the major tourist stretch. Assalah is further divided into three areas. The most northern point, and the main local residential area, is still known as Assalah. From the lighthouse the Masbat area begins, made up of a stretch of ‘camps’, hotels and laid-back restaurants that curve along the bay. To the south, starting roughly at the ruins (no entry) is the slightly more staid Mashraba, named after the freshwater springs that apparently exist around the beach. In the centre of Masbat is a small pedestrian bridge, which makes a convenient landmark and is a good place to find taxis.
nexions and the lagoon. A two-hour tour, including helmet, costs E£120.

Blue Beach Club  HORSE RIDING
(0364 0411; www.bluebeachclub.com; Assalah)
This professional-standard stable runs highly recommended hacks and treks (of up to three days) as well as riding lessons for beginners. Rates start at about E£100 per hour.

🌟 Festivals
The Dahab Festival (www.dahabfestival.info) takes place every April for one week, combining water-sport competitions, Bedouin cultural activities, live bands and beach parties.

леж Sleeping
Increased competition has raised the bar in town and there are some excellent rooms to be had for the price of a decent meal back home. Assalah boasts bedding-down options ranging from cell-like cement huts to attractive backpacker palaces with cushioned seating shaded by palm groves, as well as a good mix of more midrange resorts that are still small enough for guests to catch the mellow Dahab vibe. Luxury accommodation is available at the lagoon area. The following is only a small sampling of what is available. New places are going up all the time while older establishments are being knocked down. Budget and many midrange hotel rates in Dahab do not include breakfast.

TOP CHOICE  Alaska Camp & Hotel  HOSTEL $
(0364 1004; www.dahabescape.com; Masbat; r with/without air-con E£200/100; $k$k$) Easy on the wallet without sacrificing the small comforts, Alaska has a variety of spacious, bright and sparkling clean rooms with super comfortable beds. The attractive courtyard garden is a welcoming shady spot to relax and meet other travellers and the central location means you’re just a couple of steps from the promenade bustle.

TOP CHOICE  Sunrise Lodge  GUESTHOUSE $
(0109 057 4242; www.sunrisedahab.com; Masbat; r E£120; okable) Tucked down a sandy alley just off the promenade, this welcoming home-from-home has just five large, spotless rooms (one fan-only room is a cheaper E£80) set around a sandy courtyard shaded by palm trees. There’s free tea and coffee, hammocks and a cushion area to lounge in, a small play area for children, and management provides a highly personalised service and can help with any query.

Dahab Paradise  RESORT $$
(0100 700 4133; www.dahabparadise.com; s/d US$58/68; okable) This low-key resort, on a secluded sweep of bay on the main road to the Blue Hole, is the perfect get-away-from-it-all. Decorated in warm earthy tones with accents of antique wood, the charming rooms are a touch of understated beach-chic elegance. If all the peace and serenity gets too much, the bright lights of Masbat are a 10-minute taxi-ride away.

Dahab's Blue Hole (Map p38; location: 8km north of Dahab) is a gaping sinkhole that drops straight down – some say to as deep as 130m. Unfortunately, the site has claimed several lives, mainly thrill-seekers venturing well below the sport-diving limit.

The trap is an archway at approximately 65m, which connects the sinkhole to the open ocean. Underprepared solo divers attempting to find this archway have succumbed to narcosis, missed the archway entirely, lost all sense of direction or simply run out of air. If you leave the depths to the experienced technical divers, you’ll find the outer lip of the Blue Hole is full of marine life, and a reasonable plunge into the hole itself is somewhat akin to skydiving.

The entry point is at the Bells, a narrow breach in the reef table that forms a pool close to shore. From here, you descend through a chimney, exiting at 27m on a ledge that opens to the sea. If you swim south along the wall, a saddle in the reef at 7m allows you to enter the Blue Hole. As long as you monitor your depth carefully, you can finish up the dive by swimming across the sinkhole towards shore. Depth: 7m to 27m; rating: intermediate; access: shore.
Red Sea Relax  HOTEL $$
(0364 1309; www.red-sea-relax.com; Masbat; dm/s/d £8/37/46; ★★★) With rooms wrapped around a glistening pool, Red Sea Relax dishes up a winning formula of resort-like facilities for bargain prices. Large rooms come with nice added extras such as tea-and coffee-making facilities and TV. It's a well-organised set-up with free water fill-ups, a beckoning rooftop bar and an excellent dive centre. Cheap dormitory accommodation means you get all the resort facilities for backpacker costs.

Seven Heaven  HOSTEL $
(0364 0080; www.7heavenhotel.com; Masbat; dm £20, r with/without air-con £80/60, without bathroom £30; ★★★) An all-in-one stalwart of the Dahab scene that still offers one of the best-value shoestringer deals in town. There's a huge range of rooms, which go up in price as you add in extras; the six-bed dorms, which come with air-con and bathroom, are a bargain. You'll find a good range of amenities here including a dive shop and tour booking centre and staff are very helpful.

Alf Leila  B&B $$
(0364 0595; www.alfleila.com; cnr of Peace Rd & Sharia al-Fanar, Masbat; s/d £30/36; ★★★) With a nod towards its namesake '1001 Arabian Nights', Alf Leila's seven rooms are a daydream of gorgeous tile-work and traditional textiles decorated using lashings of muted earthy colours, stone and wood. Unfortunately the location (on the main road) isn't the best but if you don't mind a walk to the beach, and a bit of traffic noise, for its sheer uniqueness this place is still worth it.

Le Meridien Dahab Resort  RESORT $$$
(0364 0425; www.lemeridien.com/dahab; lagoon resort area, Dahab City; s/d/ste from US$125/150/175; ★★★) By far the best of the lagoon's resorts, Le Meridien spills over a series of terraces that flow down to a sweep of white sand. The rooms are the height of contemporary chic, decorated in a palette of burnt orange and stone. This is where to come if you want your Dahab experience served up with oodles of five-star service and comfort.

Dahab Coach House  GUESTHOUSE $$
(0364 1027; www.dahabcoachhouse.dk; Masbat; s/d £38/40; ★★★) What this place lacks in midrange resort facilities, it more than makes up for with hugely helpful management and a genuine welcoming feel. The rooms are simple but comfortable and the courtyard is the perfect place to chill out after a long day's diving.

Nesima Resort  RESORT $$
(0364 0320; www.nesima-resort.com; Mashraba; s/d/ste £47/61/84; ★★★) A lovely compromise if you want resort living without being isolated from town. Set amid a mature garden of blooming bougainvillea, Nesima's cosy cottages have pleasing stone and wood overtones, domed ceilings and dinky terraces.

Ghazala Hotel  HOTEL $$
(0364 2414; www.ghazaladahab.com; Mashraba; s/d £100/140; ★★★) Ghazala's cute white-domed rooms surround a narrow courtyard set with colourful mosaic tiles. Some rooms are larger than others so ask to see a few

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

DIVING INTO DAHAB

Mohamed Ali is the manager of Big Blue Dive Centre in Dahab.

What makes Dahab so special for novice divers? We’re really lucky here as our shallow, shore-access reefs host an incredible array of marine life. Lighthouse is where a lot of the open water training happens and is also one of the best reefs for spotting fish.

What are some great dives for newly qualified divers? Banner Fish Bay is home to lots of seagrass, seahorses, octopuses and fog fish and Eel Garden as well is fantastic because it’s a very virginial area where the coral is still alive. Islands Reef and Canyon Garden are also home to lots of different coral and fish.

Top tips for experienced divers? If you want to dive the Blue Hole, start early in the morning to escape the crowds. Visibility is at its best at this time and the fish will be just waking up. Later in the day, when there are too many divers, the fish tend to hide. For a great drift dive, Eel Garden to Lighthouse Reef is excellent for experienced divers.
before you decide. There are a couple of cheaper fan-only rooms as well.

**Christina Beach Palace & Christina Pool**

HOTEL $$

(2)364 0390; www.christinahotels.com; Mashraba; s/d with air-con US$62/83, without air-con US$55/76; Ụụụ) This small Swiss-run hotel offers a degree of efficiency unmatched in town. Depending on your preference, Beach Palace rooms have lovely sea views, while the recently renovated Pool-side ones are more luxurious.

**Christina Residence**

HOTEL $$

(2)364 0390; www.christinahotels.com; Mashraba; s/d with air-con US$32/40, without air-con US$25/33; Ụụụ) The large, airy rooms here come with surprisingly modern bathrooms, good beds, and surround a leafy, quiet garden. Guests get to use all the facilities of Christina Beach Palace across the road.

**Bishbishi Garden Village**

HOSTEL $

(2)364 0727; www.bishbishi.com; Sharia al-Mashraba; s/d without bathroom €5/8; Ụụụ) A classic of the Dahab camp scene, Bishbishi continues to offer a winning mix of easy-on-the-wallet rooms and lots of shaded communal areas for socialising.

**Blue Beach Club**

RESORT $$

(2)364 0411; www.bluebeachclub.com; Assalah; s/d/ste €28/36/44; Ụụụ) Blue Beach’s recently renovated annex rooms (across the road from the main resort) are bright, comfortably outfitted and boast the snazziest modern bathrooms in Dahab.

**Bamboo House Hotel**

GUESTHOUSE $$

(2)364 0263; www.bamboohouse-dahab.com; Masbat; s/d E£120/150, seaview E£130/180; Ụụụ) This central hotel has seven spacious rooms styled in a fresh jazzy palette of olive green and white.

**Bedouin Lodge**

GUESTHOUSE $

(2)364 1125; www.bedouin-lodge-dahab.com; Mashraba; s/d with air-con €17/25, without air-con €14/20) A local Bedouin family runs this simple but highly friendly hotel.

**Ali Baba**

INTERNATIONAL $$

(Masbat; mains E£30-80) One of the most popular restaurants along the waterfront strip for good reason: this place adds flair to its seafood selection with some inspired menu choices. Great service, comfy sofas to lounge on, stylish lanterns and twinkly fairy lights add to the relaxed seaside ambience.

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**Eating**

The waterfront is lined with Bedouin-style restaurants where you can relax on cushions while gazing out over the sparkling waters of the Gulf of Aqaba. Unfortunately, places serving up quality Egyptian cuisine are thin on the ground but seafood is on almost all menus, together with a good selection of international dishes.

If you’re after a cheap, filling lunch, look out for **Ali’s Kushari Cart**, which makes the rounds up and down the promenade, with Ali shouting out his sales pitch of ‘kushari, kushari’ roughly between noon and 4pm. Not only does he ladle out Egypt’s finest carbohydrate extravaganza, but also a delicious *ruz bi laban* (rice pudding). Either will set you back E£5. For self-caterers, there are numerous supermarkets dotted around Assalah, including the **Ghazala Supermarket** (Masbat; Ọlọ 8am-2am), near the main junction at the southern end of Masbat.
Fighting Kangaroo  **EGYPTIAN** $  
(Masbat; meals £15-20) Despite the unfortunate name this narrow waterfront restaurant should be commended for serving up Egyptian-style feasts at bargain-basement prices. Simple and hearty meals (pick from fish, *kafta*, chicken or vegetarian) all come with soup, salad and tahini.

**Ralph’s German Bakery**  **BAKERY** $  
(Sharia al-Fanar, Masbat; Ghazala Supermarket courtyard, Masbat; sandwiches £18-25, pastries £4-15; ☀7am-6pm) Single-handedly raising the bar for coffee in Dahab, this place is caffeine heaven and also serves up a range of particularly tempting calorific pastries and excellent sandwiches. The Sharia al-Fanar branch has the best selection and also does some original breakfast dishes.

**Nirvana**  **INDIAN** $$$  
(Masbat; dishes £45-75) A slice of the subcontinent complete with direct beach access and sun-loungers. Although not particularly authentic, the meals are tasty all the same and the ice cream, with homemade waffle cone, is perfect for a promenade stroll after dinner.

**Athanor**  **ITALIAN** $$$  
(Sharia al-Melah; pizzas £18-40, Assalah) Dahab’s best thin-crust pizzas are served up here on the shady garden terrace.

**King Chicken**  **EGYPTIAN** $  
(Sharia al-Mashraba; dishes £15-25) Always crowded with locals, this cheap and cheerful little place hits the spot for budget chicken-dinner heaven.

**Drinking**

In comparison with Sharm el-Sheikh, Dahab is fairly quiet at night, but there is a good selection of lively bars, some of which turn into discos if the atmosphere is right. Of course, after a long day of diving and desert exploration, most travellers are content with sprawling out in any of Dahab’s waterfront restaurants and nursing a few cold Stellas.

**Lavazza Cafe**  **CAFE**  
(Masbat; coffee £10-15) Excellent cappuccino and decent espresso make this cafe a good stop for your morning caffeine fix.

**Tree Bar**  **BAR**  
(Mashraba; ☀10pm-late) Two-for-one cocktail deals and a thumping soundtrack of urban, house and R&B make this open-air beach-front bar Dahab’s top late-night party venue.

**Churchill’s**  **BAR**  
(Red Sea Relax, Masbat; beer £10-14) Dahab’s sports bar has a big-screen TV so you won’t miss your favourite team play, plus a breezy rooftop terrace perfect for sunset drinks.

**Yalla Bar**  **BAR**  
(Masbat; beer £10-12) This popular waterfront bar-restaurant has a winning formula of friendly staff and excellent happy-hour beer prices from 5pm to 9pm.

**Information**

**Dangers & Annoyances**  
Dahab remains one of Egypt’s most relaxed destinations but solo female travellers should still exercise common sense after dark. Buddy-up late at night, to avoid negotiating unlit alleyways alone.

Since the Dahab suicide bombing of April 2006 (which killed 23 people and injured dozens) the government has cracked down on the seeds of Islamic fundamentalism in South Sinai and although the potential for a future terrorist attack can never be wholly ruled out, it is important to emphasise that the overwhelming majority of visitors to Dahab and the greater Sinai region enjoy their time immensely, and never experience any sort of problem.

For an overview of the history of terrorism in Sinai, see p413.

**Emergency**  
*Police* (☎364 0213/5; Mashraba; main junction near Ghazala Supermarket)  
*Tourist police* (☎364 0188; Dahab City)

**Internet Access**  
Wi-fi is widely available free at most hotels and many of the restaurants.  
*Aladdin Bookstore & Internet* (Masbat; per hr £5)  
*Net Internet Cafe* (Sharia al-Mashraba; per hr £5; ☀24hr)  
*Seven Heaven Internet Cafe* (Seven Heaven, Masbat; per hr £5; ☀24hr)

**Medical Services**  
*Dahab Specialised Hospital* (☎364 2714; Mashraba) An excellent private hospital with full hyperbaric chamber facilities.  
*Dr Haikal* (☎0100 143 3325; lagoon, Dahab City) Local doctor whose surgery also has a hyperbaric chamber.

**Money**  
There are plenty of ATMs scattered along the waterfront throughout Masbat.  
*Banque du Caire* (Sharia al-Mashraba & Masbat, near the bridge) Has an ATM.
1. Na’ama Bay (p395)  
Sharm el-Sheikh’s beachfront promenade is lined with restaurants and shops.

2. Coloured Canyon (p409)  
Northwest of Nuweiba, this canyon is named for the multicoloured stones in its walls.

3. Snorkelling & Diving (p36)  
The waters around Ras Mohammed National Park are the jewel in the crown of the Red Sea.

4. Sharm el-Sheikh (p395)  
The resort town sits between the region’s beautiful waters and its jagged mountains.
1. Na’am Bay (p395)
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4. Sharm el-Sheikh (p395)
The resort town sits between the region’s beautiful waters and its jagged mountains.
National Bank of Egypt (Sharia al-Mashraba & Masbat) Has an ATM.

Post
As well as the main post office, there is a handy post office/bookshop on the waterfront in Masbat next to Bamboo House Hotel.

Main post office (Dahab City)

Telephone
International call services are available at the post office/bookshop in Masbat. You can also place calls at Bamboo House Hotel and at Seven Heaven. All cost £7 per minute.

Telephone centrale (Dahab City; ☏️ 24hr)

Getting There & Away

Bus
From the bus station in Dahab City, well south-west of the centre of the action, East Delta Travel Co (☎️ 364 1808) has one bus a day heading north at 10.30am to Nuweiba (£15, one hour) before continuing on to Taba (£35, two hours). There is a 5.30pm bus to Sharm el-Sheikh (£15 to £20, two hours) but all the following buses also stop there. Buses to Cairo (£90, nine hours) leave at 9am, 12.30pm, 3pm and 10pm. There is also a non-air-con service at 7.30pm (£65), Buses to Al-Tor (£25 to £30, four hours) and Ismailia (£60, seven hours) leave at 10am, 8.30pm, 9.30pm and 10.30pm. At 8am there is a bus to Suez (£45, seven hours) also via Al-Tor, For Hurghada (£105, 10 hours) and Luxor (£130, 18 hours) there is one bus daily at 4pm. Be sure to check departure times with hotel staff as they’re subject to change without notice.

There are no public buses to St Katherine but during research of this book a fantastic local transport initiative called Bedouin Bus (☎️ 0101 668 4274; www.bedouinbus.com) began running transport between Dahab and St Katherine every Tuesday and Friday (£50, two hours). Check the website for up-to-date details.

Taxi drivers at the bus station (and around town) charge £100 to Sharm el-Sheikh and £250 to St Katherine.

Getting Around

Pickups go up and down the Peace Rd in Assalah and, less frequently, around the resort strip. The usual fare is £3 to £5 for trips around town, and £10 if you find one doing the entire stretch between Assalah and Dahab City. The standard taxi fare to/from the bus station is £10. To get to the Blue Hole independently you can negotiate with any of the pickup drivers in town. Don’t forget to arrange a return time (£60 to £80 return).

Bicycles are a great way to get around Dahab and you can hire them from many hotels and travel agencies in town. Ghazala Hotel in Mashraba has hire rates of £30 for one day.

Ras Abu Gallum Protectorate

The starkly beautiful Ras Abu Gallum Protectorate covers 400 sq km of coastline between Dahab and Nuweiba, mixing coastal mountains, narrow valleys, sand dunes and fine-gravel beaches with several excellent diving and snorkelling sites. Scientists describe the area as a ‘floristic frontier’, in which Mediterranean conditions are influenced by a tropical climate. This, together with its 165 plant species (including 44 that are found nowhere else in Sinai) and wealth of mammals and reptiles, gives it great environmental importance and makes it a fascinating place to visit.

As in nearby Nabq, Bedouin of the Mizena tribe live within the protectorate confines, fishing here as they have done for centuries (although this is now regulated by the protectorate).

Travel agencies in Nuweiba and Dahab offer camel, jeep and walking excursions to Ras Abu Gallum. Hiking into the reserve by following the path from the Blue Hole is also popular. The track takes you along the shoreline to Ras Abu Gallum village and El-Omeyid village (one hour), one where you can camp overnight in a hut. Most tour agencies in Dahab offer this trip for around £200 or £350 for overnight (including return transport to Blue Hole, lunch and snorkelling gear) or you can easily do this yourself.

There are several walking trails in the reserve, and you can hire Bedouin guides and camels either at Ras Abu Gallum village or, if coming from the Nuweiba side, through the ranger house at the edge of Wadi rasasah. Popular destinations within the protectorate include Bir el-Oghda, a now-deserted Bedouin village, and Bir Sugheir, a water source at the edge of the protectorate.

Nuweiba

Stretched randomly over about 15km, Nuweiba lacks a defined centre and a cohesive ambience, and functions primarily as a port town rather than a travellers’ retreat. For
a brief period, following the Egypt–Israel peace treaty of 1979, a thriving Israeli tourism trade here meant Nuweiba could claim rivalry to Dahab as Sinai’s hippy beach paradise. However, due to the vagaries of the regional political situation over recent decades, Israeli travellers have for the most part shunned Nuweiba – and much of Sinai for that matter. While Sharm has boomed under waves of foreign and domestic investment, and Dahab has grown steadily into a low-key resort town, Nuweiba has been left to go to seed. As a result, most travellers pass through Nuweiba either on their way to the scenic beach camps further north, or to catch the Aqaba-bound ferry en route to Petra in Jordan.

Although it’s perhaps not a tourist destination in itself, some fine sandy beaches, a number of laid-back resorts and backpacker-friendly camps make Nuweiba a pleasant enough place to spend a few days. All the camps and hotels here can organise jeep and camel safaris into the interior, and the modest diving scene means that its offshore reefs are comparatively uncrowded.

**Activities**

**Snorkelling & Diving**

Underwater delights are the feature attraction of Nuweiba, and while not as dramatic as at other resorts on the Gulf of Aqaba, the dive sites tend to be less busy, with an impressive variety of marine life. There are shallow reefs offshore that are reasonable places to snorkel, but the best snorkelling is the **Stone House Reef** just south of town.

For an overview of diving in the Red Sea, see p36.

**Ras Shaitan**

(Map p38; location: 15km north of Nuweiba) The highlight of this dive is undoubtedly the contoured topography, including narrow valleys, sand-filled depressions and deep chasms. Depth: 10m to 30m; rating: intermediate; access: shore.

**Sinker**

(Map p38; location: Nuweiba) The Sinker is a massive submerged mooring buoy designed for cargo ships, which was sunk by mistake in the mid-1990s. Since then, it has developed into a fantastic artificial reef, attracting a host of small, colourful species. Depth: 6m to 35m; rating: intermediate; access: shore.

**Camel & Jeep Safaris**

With the exception of Dahab, Nuweiba is the best place along the coast to arrange camel or jeep safaris into the interior. Almost every camp in Tarabin offers these trips, but take care that whoever you pick is a local Bedouin – not only are they marginalised by tour operators from the Nile Valley and therefore need the work, but there have been some instances of travellers lost in the desert without water because their so-called guides didn’t know the routes.

Register with the police before beginning the safari, and don’t pay the camel driver until you return to the village. Itineraries – and as a result, prices – are generally custom-designed, but expect to pay from £75 to £100 per person for an evening camel trip into the mountains with dinner at a Bedouin camp, and from about £300 to £400 per person per day for a safari including all food and water.

In addition to trips to the popular **Coloured Canyon** (see p409 for more information), other popular destinations are **Ain al-Furtega**, a palm-filled oasis 16km northwest of Nuweiba; and **Mayat el-Wishwash**, a
large cistern hidden between two boulders in a canyon – it used to be the largest cistern in Sinai but now has only a trickle of water, except after floods. Nearby is Mayat Malkha, a palm grove fed by the waters of Mayat el-Wishwashwi and set amid colourful sandstone.

Wadi Huweijit is an impressive sandstone canyon with lookouts giving panoramic views over to Saudi Arabia. Ain Khudra (Green Spring) is where Miriam was sup-
posed to have been struck by leprosy for criticising Moses. The picturesque Ain Umm Ahmed is the largest oasis in eastern Sinai, with lots of palms, Bedouin houses and a famous stream that becomes an icy river in the winter months.

Further afield, Wadi Sheikh Atiya is named after the father of the Tarabin tribe – the largest tribe in the area – who lies buried here under a white dome. There is an oasis here and Bedouin frequently come on pilgrimage. Gebel Barga is a mountain that is difficult to climb, yet affords stunning views over the mountains of eastern Sinai.

Sleeping
On the northern edge of town is Tarabin, essentially a pedestrian-only boardwalk that stretches along the waterfront for 1.5km. Unfortunately the lack of business in recent years has contributed to a lackadaisical attitude in both beach cleaning and camp repairs; a shame because if Tarabin was spruced up a little it could easily be the mellow beach-camp paradise that Dahab was a decade ago.

The camps and hotels listed below all keep their patch of sand clean and are good choices for those seeking a more serene scene than Dahab. If you’re looking for a complete beach escape with traditional Egyptian palm-thatch huts on the beach, you’re probably better off looking further north along the coast (see boxed text p426).

Nakhil Inn
INN $$
(0350 0879; www.nakhil-inn.com; Tarabin; s/d US$46/56; ⚫) The friendly Nakhil is a cosy compromise for those who want hotel comforts without the crowds. Local textiles and stained wood have been used in abundance throughout the communal areas while the charming studio-style wooden cabins exude simple beach chic. Guests can snorkel the reef just a few metres from the shore, go kayaking or diving, or simply unwind while lazing about in one of the hammocks or shaded seating spots strewn across the private beach.

Petra Camp
BEACH CAMP $
(0100 610 8731; www.petra-camp.com; Tarabin; s/d E£40/80; ⚫) One of the nicest camps in Tarabin. The centrepiece here is an atmospheric open-air restaurant that was constructed from recycled wood salvaged from a defunct Cairo theatre. Huts are simple but well cared for and most come with air-con. The communal bathrooms are clean, and the restaurant serves up a decent selection of Egyptian and international favourites.

Big Dune
BEACH CAMP $
(0109 198 7803; Tarabin; hut/ r E£30/80) This well-looked-after Tarabin camp has a wide variety of accommodation ranging from rustic wooden huts with fan through to more expensive air-con rooms (E£100).

Habiba Village
INN $$$
(0122 731 1455; Tarabin; s/d E£60/130, without bathroom E£40/80; ⚫) Spartan but spotless rooms in a well-cared-for garden slap in the middle of the Tarabin scene. Management really endeavours to keep everything spick and span and is a friendly bunch.
Planning a brief excursion to Jordan? Wishing you had a bit of info on the ancient city of Petra? Here’s a quick guide to one of the ‘New Seven Wonders of the World’. For the full story on Jordan, pick up a copy of the guidebook, or buy and download individual chapters from the Lonely Planet website, lonelyplanet.com.

Petra

Hewn from rock walls of multicoloured sandstone, the imposing facades of Petra’s great temples and tombs are an enduring testament to the vision of the desert tribes who sculpted them. The Nabataeans – Arabs who dominated the region in pre-Roman times – chose as their capital a place concealed from the outside world, and fashioned it into one of the Middle East’s most remarkable cities. Almost as spectacular as the monuments are the countless shades and swirls in the rock. Petra is often called the ‘Rose-Red City’, but this hardly does justice to the extraordinary range of colours that blend as the sun makes its daily passage over the site.

**SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES**

The ancient city is approached via the Siq, a canyon-like passage that is actually a single block that has been rent apart by tectonic forces – at various points you can see where the grain of the rock on one side matches the other. The Siq can seem to continue forever, and the sense of anticipation builds as you look around each corner for your first glimpse of the Treasury, Petra’s most famous monument.

**Al-Khazneh**, or the Treasury, is where most visitors fall in love with Petra. The Hellenistic exterior is an astonishing piece of craftsmanship; the sophistication, symmetry, scale and grandeur of the carving enough to take away the breath of first-time visitors. Standing here is a magical introduction to the ancient city, especially since it’s the precise location of the Holy Grail – at least according to the Hollywood classic *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

Heading towards the ancient city centre are over 40 tombs and houses built by the Nabataeans and known as the Street of Facades. Continuing along you’ll reach a Roman-style *theatre*, which was built over 2000 years ago and has a capacity of about 3000 in 45 rows of seats, with three horizontal sections separated by two corridors. The Wadi Musa riverbed widens out after here – to the right (or north), carved into the cliff, are the burial places known as the *Royal Tombs*. There are more tombs around Petra than any other type of structure, and for years archaeologists assumed the city was just one vast necropolis. The reason why so few dwellings have been discovered is that the Nabataeans lived in tents, much as some Bedouin do today.

One of Petra’s most magnificent sights is **Al-Deir**, or the Monastery, which is reached via a one-hour uphill slog from the Colonnaded Street (Cardo Maximus). Similar in design to the Treasury, the imposing Monastery – 50m wide and 45m high – is just as impressive. Built in the 3rd century BC as a Nabataean tomb, the Monastery gets its name from the crosses carved on its inside walls, suggesting that the building was used as a church in Byzantine times. The building has towering columns and a large urn flanked by two half-pediments, and like the Treasury has heavy Hellenistic influences.

**Petra by Night** (admission JD12; 8.30-10.30pm Mon, Wed & Thu) is a magical way to see the old city, taking you along the Siq (lined with hundreds of candles) in silence as far as the Treasury, where traditional Bedouin music is played and mint tea is served.

**SLEEPING**

**Amra Palace Hotel**

(3 215 7070; www.amrapalace.com; s/d JD46/54) This lovely hotel has a magnificent lobby, marble pillars, giant brass coffeepots and Damascene-style furniture. The brothers who have run this hotel for more than a decade take a personal interest in the details, and each room has spotless linen, in addition to wooden headboards, upholstered furniture and satellite TV.

**Cleopetra Hotel**

(3 215 7090; s/d/tr JD12/16/21) Located in the centre of Wadi Musa, this popular backpacker spot offers the obligatory nightly screening of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. The rooms here, all with private bathroom and hot water, are on the small side, but there’s
a cosy communal sitting area that feels like your aunt’s sitting room. You can sleep on the roof for JD5 with breakfast.

**Mövenpick Hotel**

(2) 3-215 7111; www.moevenpick-petra.com; r JD155; $$$ This beautifully crafted Arabian-style hotel, 100m from the entrance to Petra, is worth a visit simply to admire the inlaid furniture, marble fountains, wooden screens and brass salvers. Petals are floated daily in the fountains, a roaring fire welcomes residents to the lounge, and pleasant views are afforded from the roof garden. As the hotel is in the bottom of the valley, there are not sweeping views, but the large and super-luxurious rooms all have huge picture windows regardless.

**EATING & DRINKING**

**Petra Kitchen**

(cooking course incl meal JD35) On the main street to the site entrance, this is one of the few places where you can sample Jordanian home cooking. Guests help prepare the three-course meal in the kitchen before tucking into the results.

**Al-Wadi Restaurant**

(international $$) Right on Shaheed roundabout, this lively local spot offers pasta and pizza, as well as a range of vegetarian dishes and local Bedouin specialities.

**Cave Bar**

(bar) (drinks from JD6) If you’ve never been to a bar in a 2000-year-old Nabataean rock tomb (and we’re guessing you haven’t!), then this memorable spot near the visitors centre is an absolute must.

**INFORMATION**

The base town for exploring Petra is Wadi Musa (Valley of Moses), a patchy mass of hotels, restaurants and shops located about 3km from the visitors centre (2) 3-215 6020; 6am-5.30pm May-Sep, to 5pm Oct-Apr). Entry fees are JD50/55/60 for one-/two-/three-day passes. Note that at the time of publication, one Jordanian dinar (JD) was approximately equal to US$1.40 and €1. The country code for calling Jordan is 962.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

Ferries depart from Nuweiba, Egypt, and arrive in Aqaba, Jordan. For more information on the crossing, see p424. From the ferry terminal in Aqaba, taxis meet arriving ships in order to shuttle tourists to Wadi Musa. When dealing with taxi drivers, it helps to be a good negotiator – and to have a lot of friends with you to bring down the price. Generally speaking, a taxi costs about JD35 to Wadi Musa. Microbuses depart when full for Wadi Musa (JD2, two hours) from Aqaba’s bus station on Sharia King Talal between 8am and 2pm.

Given that the ferry crossing to Jordan isn’t always smooth sailing, a good alternative is to travel by bus via Israel. From Taba, you can cross the Egypt–Israel border, and then catch a quick taxi (US$15 to US$20) to the Wadi Araba border crossing between Israel and Jordan. Note that you can still cross into Jordan and return to Egypt with an Israeli stamp, though you will not be allowed to enter Lebanon, Syria and a whole slew of other Middle Eastern countries. Although Israeli border guards are usually happy to not stamp your passport, the Egyptian and Jordanian border guards generally won’t comply. If you’re carrying on to Syria it’s best to take the ferry.

**GETTING AROUND**

In Wadi Musa, most hotels offer a free shuttle service to and from the visitors centre, though a taxi ride from anywhere in Wadi Musa to Petra shouldn’t cost you more than JD1 or JD2. Although hikers have little difficulty exploring Petra’s sights, donkeys and camels accompanied by guides are available all around Petra for negotiable prices.
Petra

WALKING TOUR

Splendid though it is, the Treasury is not the full stop of a visit to Petra that many people may imagine. In some ways, it’s just the semicolon – a place to pause after the exertions of the Siq, before exploring the other remarkable sights and wonders just around the corner.

Even if you’re on a tight schedule or worried the bus won’t wait, try to find another two hours in your itinerary to complete this walking tour. Our illustration shows the key highlights of the route, as you wind through Wadi Musa from the Siq, pause at the Treasury and pass the tombs of the broader Outer Siq. With energy and a stout pair of shoes, climb to the High Place of Sacrifice for a magnificent eagle’s-eye view of Petra. Return to the Street of Facades and the Theatre. Climb the steps opposite the Urn Tomb and neighbouring Silk Tomb: these Royal Tombs are particularly magnificent in the golden light of sunset.

Is the thought of all that walking putting you off? Don’t let it! There are donkeys to help you with the steep ascents and Bedouin stalls for a reviving herb tea. If you run out of steam, camels are on standby for a ride back to the Treasury.

TOP TIPS

» **Morning Glory** From around 7am in summer and 8am in winter, watch the early morning sun slide down the Treasury facade.

» **Pink City** Stand opposite the Royal Tombs at sunset (around 4pm in winter and 5pm in summer) to learn how Petra earned its nickname.

» **Floral Tribute** Petra’s oleanders flower in May.

**Down Differently**

A superb walk leads from the High Place of Sacrifice, past the Garden Tomb to Petra City Centre.
High Place of Sacrifice
Imagine the ancients treading the stone steps and it’ll take your mind off the steep ascent. The hilltop platform was used for incense-burning and libation-pouring in honour of forgotten gods.

Outer Siq
Take time to inspect the tombs just past the Treasury. Some appear to have a basement but, in fact, they show how the floor of the wadi has risen over the centuries.

Street of Facades
Cast an eye at the upper storeys of some of these tombs and you’ll see a small aperture. Burying the dead in attics was meant to deter robbers – the plan didn’t work.

Head for Heights
For a regal view of Petra, head for the heights above the Royal Tombs, via the staircase.

Urn Tomb
Earning its name from the urn-shaped finial crowning the pediment, this grand edifice with supporting arched vaults was perhaps built for the man represented by the toga-wearing bust in the central aperture.

Silk Tomb
Perhaps Nabataean builders were attracted to Wadi Musa because of the colourful beauty of the raw materials. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the weather-eroded, striated sandstone of the Silk Tomb.

Theatre
Most stone amphitheatres are freestanding, but this one is carved almost entirely from the solid rock. Above the back row are the remains of earlier tombs; their facades sacrificed in the name of entertainment.
Eating

At the port there is a cluster of places selling *fuul* (fava bean paste) and *ta’amiyya* (falafel) in the area behind the National Bank of Egypt and before the ticket office for Aqaba ferries. If you’d prefer a bit more than a quick bite, however, the selection is a little better in and around Nuweiba City. If you’re out in Tarabin, you’ll probably take meals at your camp or hotel. For general groceries, *Swiss Market* (Nuweiba City) has a good selection of basic supplies.

**Cleopatra Restaurant**

(SEAFood $)

(Nuweiba City; dishes E£20-50) One of the more popular tourist restaurants in Nuweiba City, Cleopatra offers up the bounty of the sea along with a few Western fast-food favourites.

**Han Kang**

(ASIAN $)

(Nuweiba City; dishes E£20-40) This surprisingly good Chinese restaurant hits the spot, especially if you’ve been on the road for a while and can’t bear to look at another falafel sandwich.

**Dr Shishkebab**

(GRILL $)

(Bazaar, Nuweiba City; dishes E£10-30) The place to head to for filling and tasty kebab meals.

Information

**Emergency**

Tourist police Nuweiba City (☎ 350 0231; near Helnan Nuweiba; 24hr); Nuweiba Port (☎ 350 0401)

**Internet Access**

Al-Mostakbal Internet Café (Nuweiba City; per hr E£4; 9am-3am)

**Medical Services**

Nuweiba Hospital (☎ 350 0302; Nuweiba City; 24hr) Just off the Main East Coast Hwy to Dahab.

**Money**

None of the banks will handle Jordanian dinars. **Banque du Caire** (Nuweiba Port) Has an ATM. **Banque Misr** (Nuweiba Port) Has an ATM. **National Bank of Egypt** (Helnan Nuweiba) Has an ATM.

**Boat**

There are two public ferries run by ABMaritime (www.abmaritime.com.jo). The so-called ‘fast-ferry’ service between Nuweiba in Egypt and Aqaba in Jordan leaves Nuweiba Sunday to Friday (supposedly) at 3.30pm and takes roughly two hours assuming normal sea conditions. Heading back to Nuweiba, fast ferries depart from Aqaba at noon. One-way tickets cost US$75 for economy and US$95 for first class. You must be at the port two hours before to get through the shambolic departure formalities in the main ferry terminal building.

A word of caution: we have received numerous letters from readers detailing the aggravating specifics of interminable delays along this sea route. A small sampling of horror stories includes a monumental 20-hour delay due to heavy thunderstorms and rough seas, as well as a truly epic three-day delay due to severe power outages. While the majority of travellers experience a delay of no more than an hour or two, you might want to leave some flexibility in your travel schedule if you’re planning on taking the ferry to Jordan.

There’s also a ‘slow-ferry’ service, leaving Nuweiba at 2pm daily and arriving in Aqaba on average about five hours later. Heading back to Nuweiba, slow ferries depart from Aqaba at midnight. One-way tickets cost US$65 for economy and US$70 for first class. As previously mentioned, while the fast ferry isn’t always fast – or even on time – we can’t stress how much more comfortable it is than the slow ferry.

Tickets can be paid in either US dollars or Egyptian pounds and you must also pay your Egyptian departure tax (US$10/E£50) when you purchase them. Tickets must be purchased on the day of departure only at the ferry ticket office (☎ 352 0427; 9am-3pm), in a small building near the port. Note that the only exception to this rule is during the hajj, when boats are booked weeks prior to departure. During this period, it’s necessary to buy your ticket as far in advance as possible.

To find the ticket office, turn right when you exit the bus station, walking towards the water, and turn right again after the National Bank of Egypt. Continue along one block, and you’ll see
Sinai Coast

the sand-coloured ticket office building ahead to your left.

Most nationalities are entitled to receive a free Jordanian visa upon arrival in Aqaba. You hand in your passport to the immigration officials once onboard the ferry and collect it once you’ve arrived in the immigration building in Aqaba.

TOURISTIC FERRY

As well as the two public ferries stated above, during research for this book, AB Maritime began running a new tourist ferry (named the ‘Babel Ferry’) on the Nuweiba to Aqaba route. Operated by Meenagate Marine (% in Aqaba 3-201 3100; info@meenagate.com), this daily fast-ferry service leaves Nuweiba Port at 6.30am and has a sailing time of 1½ hours. You must be at the port one hour earlier. Heading back to Nuweiba the ferry leaves from Aqaba’s Royal Yacht Club port (rather than the public port) at 7pm. Tickets cost US$85 one way or US$125 return and include Egyptian departure tax.

As this service is newly opened to independent travellers, tickets are best booked by emailing Meenagate directly 48 hours prior to sailing. You will then receive your ticket and pay for it on arrival at the port. Note that you cannot buy tickets for this ferry at the Nuweiba ferry ticket office. Meenagate is planning to open a ticket office in Nuweiba in the near future and it will most likely be possible to also buy tickets for this ferry through any of the tour operators in Dahab or Sharm el-Sheikh soon.

Bus

East Delta Travel Co (% 352 0371; Nuweiba Port) has buses at 9am and 3pm to Cairo (E£60 to E£100, seven to eight hours) which go via Taba (E£15); there is also a noon service to Taba only. Buses to Sharm el-Sheikh (E£25, three to four hours) via Dahab (E£15, one hour) leave at 6.30am and 4pm. There are no public bus services to St Katherine but local transport initiative Bedouin Bus (% 0101 668 4274; www.bedouinbus.com) began running transport initiative between Nuweiba and St Katherine every Wednesday and Sunday (E£50) in late 2011. Check the website for up-to-date details.

Servees

Taxis and a couple of servees hang out by the port. Unless you get there when the ferry has arrived from Aqaba, you’ll have to wait a long time for a servees to fill up. A taxi to Dahab costs about E£150 and roughly E£100 to the beach camps on the Nuweiba–Taba road.

Getting Around

Expect to pay E£10 to E£20 for a taxi from the port/bus station to Nuweiba City, depending on your destination and negotiating powers, and from E£5 for the few kilometres between Tarabin and Nuweiba City.

Taba

Taba holds the dubious distinction of being the last portion of Sinai to be returned to Egypt under the terms of the 1979 Egypt–Israel peace treaty. It had been a minor point of contention between the two countries for nearly a decade. Egypt argued that Taba was on the Egyptian side of the armistice line agreed to in 1949, while Israel contended that it was on the Ottoman side of a border agreed between the Ottomans and British Egypt in 1906, and therefore the lines drawn in 1949 and 1979 were in error. In 1988 the issue was submitted to an international commission, which ruled in Egypt’s favour – Israel returned Taba to Egypt later that year.

As part of this agreement, Israeli travellers were permitted to visit Taba visa-free for up to 48 hours, which sparked tourism development throughout the town. However, following a series of deadly bomb attacks in 2004 that killed and injured a large number of Israeli travellers, tourism virtually ceased in Taba. Today the town primarily serves as a border crossing for overlanders heading between Egypt and Israel and the Palestinian Territories. However, the flashy Taba Heights project just to the south, aimed almost exclusively at high-rolling overseas tourists, is the latest attempt by the Egyptian government to reinvigorate the stagnant local economy.

Sights

Taba Heights (www.tabahights.com) About 20km south of Taba is Taba Heights, one of the lynchpins in Egyptian efforts to create a ‘Red Sea Riviera’. After years of construction, it now houses five luxury hotels, a casino, upmarket shops, bars and restaurants, a private medical clinic and extensive water-sports facilities.

Pharaoh’s Island (Gezirat Fara’un; adult/child E£20/10; 9am-5pm)

About 7km south of Taba and 250m off the Egyptian coast, this tiny islet in turquoise waters is dominated by the much-restored Castle of Salah ad-Din. The castle is actually a fortress built by the Crusaders in 1115, but captured and expanded by Saladin in 1170 as a bulwark against feared Crusader penetration south from Palestine.
GO EXPLORE THE OTHER SINAI SHORE

If you’re seeking a sandy shore that hasn’t succumbed to restaurant touts and rowdy bar music – where lazing in a hammock is the de rigueur activity – the stunning coastline between Nuweiba and Taba, speckled by simple beach camps, may be for you. This region’s business for years came from Israelis looking for a close-to-home-Goa. Unfortunately political turmoil in recent years has kept many of them away and other travellers have yet to venture north and discover this tranquil beach-bum haven. For those who want to seriously veg out this is Egypt’s last bastion of the traditional beach camp.

Here are some places to get you started but there are plenty more camps along this stretch if you want to explore. All the camps listed here have restaurants and can help organise desert treks for those who tire of slothing out on the sand. If you don’t have your own transport and don’t want to hire a taxi the East Delta buses running between Dahab and Taba or Cairo and Nuweiba can drop you anywhere along this shore.

**Sawa Camp**
(0111 322 7554; www.sawacamp.com; Mahash area; s/d hut E£50/60) A strip of perfect white beach, hammocks on your hut porch, solar-powered showers and a restaurant dishing up delicious meals – Sawa is our idea of heaven. Bedouin owner Salama has got all the little touches right. Huts have electricity at night, the communal bathrooms win our award for most spotlessly clean toilets in Egypt, and the service and welcome make you instantly feel at home. Laid-back, family-friendly and the perfect de-stress travel stop.

**Basata**
(350 0480; www.basata.com; Ras Burgaa area; camping per person €14, s/d hut €23/42, 3-person chalets €80) Basata (‘simplicity’ in Arabic) is an ecologically minded settlement that lives by its name – using organically grown produce and recycling its rubbish. There are simple huts sharing facilities, or traditionally designed mud-brick chalets. Self-catering is the norm here with a communal kitchen and cooking ingredients available to buy, though if you’re feeling lazy there’s a bakery here too. The ambience is very laid-back and family-friendly with a New Age twist.

**Ayyash Camp**
(0122 760 4668; Ras Shaitan area; s/d hut E£30/60) Located on the rocky point of the frighteningly named Ras Shaitan (Satan’s Head), Ayyash’s stretch of sand is a bit stony and the facilities really are basic. Still, that doesn’t dissuade its fans, who come here to flop out on its hippy vibes and cheap, chilled-out beach-bum living.

**Castle Beach**
(0122 739 8495; http://castlebeachsinai.net/home.html; Ras Shaitan area; s/d hut incl half-board E£150/300, ) Just north of Ayyash Camp, Castle Beach has more-upmarket huts made of palm-thatch and stone on a wide strip of beach.

The only boat to the island runs from the Salah ad-Din Hotel, on the coast just opposite. Unfortunately the service is unreliable, though if the boat is running, a return ticket costs only US$4. Boat tickets are available from the hotel reception, and tickets for the fortress are available on landing.

**Sleeping & Eating**

Most of the tourism in Taba these days is focused on package holiday deals in the Taba Heights project. This is also where you’ll find a good range of upmarket restaurants and bars.

**Toby a Boutique Hotel**
(353 0275; www.tobyaboutiquehotel.com; Taba; s/d/ste half-board US$90/110/140, ) A resort with a difference, Toby is a beautifully designed, intimate resort incorporating traditional Egyptian architecture and huge amounts of quirky interior details. With spa-
Sinai’s rugged interior is populated by barren mountains, wind-sculpted canyons and wadis that burst into life with even the briefest rains. The rocks and desert landscapes turn shades of pink, ochre and velvet black as the sun rises and falls, and what little vegetation there is appears to grow magically out of the rock. Bedouin still wander through the wilderness, and camels are the best way to travel, with much of the terrain too rocky even for a 4WD. Against this desolate backdrop some of the most sacred events in recorded human history are said to have taken place, which has consequently immortalised Sinai in the annals of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.
St Katherine Protectorate

The 4350-sq-km St Katherine Protectorate was created in 1996 to counteract the detrimental effects of rapidly increasing tourism on St Katherine’s Monastery and the adjacent Mt Sinai. In addition to the area’s unique high-altitude desert ecosystem, it protects a wealth of historical sites sacred to the world’s three main monotheistic religions, and the core part around the monastery has been declared a Unesco World Heritage site. Although at times it can be difficult to pry yourself away from Sinai’s beaches, a visit to the St Katherine Protectorate is not to be missed.

Rising up out of the desert and jutting above the other peaks surrounding the monastery is the towering 2285m Mt Sinai (Gebel Musa). Tucked into a barren valley at the foot of Mt Sinai is the ancient St Katherine’s Monastery. Approximately 3.5km from here is the small town of Al-Milga, which is also called Katreen and is known as the ‘Meeting Place’ by local Jabaliyya Bedouin.

Sights

St Katherine’s Monastery

(admission free; 9am-noon Mon-Thu & Sat, except religious holidays) This ancient monastery traces its founding to about AD 330, when the Roman empress Helena had a small chapel and a fortified refuge for local hermits built beside what was believed to be the burning bush from which God spoke to Moses. In the 6th century Emperor Justinian ordered a fortress to be constructed around the original chapel, together with a basilica and a monastery, to provide a secure home for the monastic community that had grown here, and as a refuge for the Christians of southern Sinai. Since then the monastery has been visited by pilgrims from throughout the world, many of whom braved extraordinarily difficult and dangerous journeys to reach the remote and isolated site. Today St Katherine’s is considered one of the oldest continually functioning monastic communities in the world, and its chapel is one of early Christianity’s only surviving churches.

The monastery – which, together with the surrounding area, has been declared a Unesco World Heritage site – is named after St Katherine, the legendary martyr of Alexandria, who was tortured on a spiked wheel and then beheaded for her faith. Tradition holds that her body was transported by angels away from the torture device (which spun out of control and killed the pagan onlookers) and onto the slopes of Egypt’s highest mountain peak. The peak, which lies about 6km south of Mt Sinai, subsequently became known as Gebel Katarina. Katherine’s body was subsequently ‘found’ about 300 years later by monks from the monastery in a state of perfect preservation.

Today a paved access road has removed the hazards that used to accompany a trip to the monastery, and both the monastery and the mountain are routinely packed with tour buses and people. It is especially full early in the morning, although somehow the monastery’s interior tranquillity manages to make itself felt despite the crowds. When you visit, remember that this is still a functioning monastery, which necessitates conservative dress – no one with shorts is permitted to enter, and women must cover their shoulders.

Church of the Transfiguration

This ornately decorated 6th-century church has a nave flanked by massive marble columns and walls covered in richly gilded icons and paintings. At the church’s eastern end, a gilded 17th-century iconostasis separates the nave from the sanctuary and the apse, where St Katherine’s remains are interred (off limits to most visitors). High in the apse above the altar is one of the monastery’s most stunning artistic treasures, the 6th-century mosaic of the transfiguration, although it can be difficult to see past the chandeliers and the iconostasis. To the left of and below the altar is the monastery’s holiest area, the Chapel of the Burning Bush, which is off limits to the public.

The Burning Bush

It’s possible to see what is thought to be a descendant of the original burning bush in the monastery compound. However, due to visitors snipping cuttings of the bush to take home as blessings, the area surrounding the bush is now fenced off. Near the burning bush is the Well of Moses, a natural spring that is supposed to give marital happiness to those who drink from it.

Sacred Sacristy

(Monastery Museum; adult/student £25/10) Above the Well of Moses is the superb monastery museum, which has been magnificently restored. It has displays (labelled in
Arabic and English) of many of the monastery's artistic treasures, including some of the spectacular Byzantine-era icons from its world-famous collection, numerous precious chalices, and gold and silver crosses.

Although it contains a priceless collection of ancient manuscripts and illuminated bibles, the monastery's library is unfortunately closed to the general public.

Outside the monastery walls is a gift shop selling replicas of icons and other religious items (there's also a branch inside the monastery compound just near the entrance), and a cafe with an array of cold drinks and snacks. The least-crowded days for visiting the monastery are generally Tuesday and Wednesday, while Saturday and Monday tend to be the most crowded.

**Mt Sinai**

(Mountain) Known locally as Gebel Musa, Mt Sinai is revered by Christians, Muslims and Jews, all of whom believe that God delivered his Ten Commandments to Moses at its summit. The mountain is easy and beautiful to climb, and although you'll invariably be overwhelmed with crowds of other visitors, it offers a taste of the magnificence of southern Sinai's high mountain region. For those visiting as part of a pilgrimage, it also offers a moving glimpse into biblical times. All hikers must be accompanied by a guide (hired from the monastery car park), which helps provide work for the local Bedouin.

There are two well-defined routes up to the summit – the camel trail and the Steps of Repentance – which meet about 300m below the summit at a plateau known as Elijah's Basin. Here, everyone must take a steep series of 750 rocky and uneven steps to the top, where there is a small chapel and mosque (although these are kept locked).

Both the climb and the summit offer spectacular views of nearby plunging valleys and of jagged mountain chains rolling off into the distance, and it's usually possible to see the even-higher summit of Gebel Katarina in the distance. Most people make the climb in the pre-dawn hours to see the magnificence of the sun rising over the surrounding peaks, and then arrive back at the base before 9am, when the monastery opens for visitors. As late as mid-May, be prepared to share the summit with up to several hundred other visitors, some carrying stereos, others bibles and hymn books. With the music and singing, and people nudging each other for space, it can be difficult to actually sleep, especially in the small hours before sunrise.

A more serene alternative is to walk up for sunset, when you'll rarely have more than 40 other people sharing the summit with you. If you decide on this option you must be comfortable making the descent down the camel trail in the dark and make sure you have sturdy shoes and a good torch (flashlight).

Due to the sanctity of the area, and the tremendous pressure that large groups place on the environment, the Egyptian National Parks Office has instituted various regulations. If you spend the night on the mountain, you are asked to sleep below the summit at the small Elijah's Basin plateau. Here you'll find several composting toilets and a 500-year-old cypress tree, marking the spot where the prophet Elijah is said to have heard the voice of God. Bring sufficient food and water, warm clothes and a sleeping bag. It gets cold and windy, even in summer, and in winter light snows are common.

**Camel Trail**

The start of the camel trail is reached by walking along the northern wall of the monastery past the end of the compound. This is the easier route, and takes about two hours to ascend, moving at a steady pace. The trail is wide, clear and gently sloping as it moves
St Katherine’s Monastery

A HISTORY OF THE MONASTERY

4th Century With hermetic communities congregating in the area, a chapel is established around the site of Moses’ miraculous Burning Bush 1.

6th Century In a show of might, Emperor Justinian adds the monastery fortifications 2 and orders the building of the basilica, which is graced by Byzantine art, including the Mosaic of the Transfiguration 3.

7th Century The prophet Mohammed signs the Ahtiname 4, a declaration of his protection of the monastery. When the Arab armies conquer Egypt in AD 641, the monastery is left untouched. Despite the era’s tumultuous times, monastery abbot St John Klimakos writes his famed Ladder of Divine Ascent 5 treatise, depicted in the Sacred Sacristy.

9th Century Extraordinary happenings surround the monastery when, according to tradition, a monk discovers the body of St Katherine on a nearby mountain summit.

11th Century To escape the wrath of Fatimid caliph Al-Hakim, wily monks build a mosque within the monastery grounds.

15th Century Frequent raids and attacks on the monastery lead the monks to build the Ancient Gate 6 to prevent the ransacking of church treasures and to keep the monastic community safe.

19th Century In 1859 biblical scholar Constantin von Tischendorf borrows 347 pages of the Codex Sinaiticus 7 from the monastery, but fails to get his library books back on time. Greek artisans travel from the island of Tinos in 1871 to help construct the bell tower 8.

20th Century Renovations inside the monastery reveal 18 more missing parchment leaves from the Codex Sinaiticus, proving that all the secrets hidden within these ancient walls may not yet be revealed.

Fortifications
The formidable walls are 2m thick and 11m high. Justinian sent a Balkan garrison to watch over the newly fortified monastery, and today’s local Jabaleyia tribe are said to be their descendents.

The Burning Bush
This flourishing bramble (the endemic Sinai shrub Rubus Sanctus) was transplanted in the 10th century to its present location. Tradition states that cuttings of the plant refuse to grow outside the monastery walls.
Mosaic of the Transfiguration
Lavishly made using thousands of pieces of glass, gold, silver and stone tesserae, this Byzantine mosaic (completed AD 551) recreates Christianity’s Gospel accounts of Jesus’ miraculous revelation as the son of God.

Ahtiname
A monastery delegation sought the protection of Mohammed, and he signed his guarantee by handprint. This document on display in the Sacred Sacrity is only a copy; the original is in Istanbul.

Bell Tower
The nine bells that hang inside the tower were a present from Tsar Alexander II of Russia. While these are rung for Sunday services, an older semantron (wooden percussion instrument) signals vespers and matins.

Ancient Gate
Look up at the high walls and you’ll see a ramshackle wooden structure. In times of strife monks left via this primitive lift, lowered to the ground by a pulley.

Church of the Transfiguration

Ladder of Divine Ascent
This 12th-century icon is one of the monastery’s most valuable. It depicts abbot St John Klimakos leading a band of monks up the ladder of salvation to heaven.

Codex Sinaiticus
The world’s oldest near-complete bible; 347 pages of the Codex were taken to Russia in 1859 and sold by Stalin to the UK in 1933. Remaining parchments are displayed in the manuscript room.
up a series of switchbacks, with the only potential difficulty – apart from sometimes fierce winds – being gravely patches that can be slippery on the descent. Most people walk up, but it’s also possible to hire a camel at the base, just behind the monastery, to take you to where the camel trail ends at Elijah’s Basin. If you decide to try a camel, it’s easier on the anatomy (especially if you’re male) to ride up the mountain, rather than down.

En route are several kiosks selling tea and soft drinks, and near the summit vendors rent out blankets (£5) and mattresses (£10) to help ward off the chill. If you are ascending in the night to wait for sunrise at the summit, both are worthy investments as the mattresses will provide a layer of protection from the ice-cold rocks, and the blankets (even though they smell like camels) will protect you from the howling winds.

**Steps of Repentance**

The alternative path to the summit comprises the taxing 3750 Steps of Repentance, which begin outside the southeastern corner of the monastery compound. They were laid by one monk as a form of penance. The steps – 3000 up to Elijah’s Basin and then the final 750 to the summit – are made of roughly hewn rock, and are steep and uneven in many places, requiring strong knees and concentration in placing your feet. The stunning mountain scenery along the way, though, makes this path well worth the extra effort and the lower reaches of the trail afford impressive views of the monastery.

If you want to try both routes, it’s easier to take the camel trail on the way up and the steps on the way back down. This trail shouldn’t be attempted in the dark, so if you are heading to the summit for sunset and not staying overnight, go up via the steps and come down the easier camel trail.

**Activities**

**Trekking**

St Katherine’s Monastery lies in the heart of South Sinai’s high mountain region, and the surrounding area is an ideal trekking destination for anyone with a rugged and adventurous bent. Treks range from half a day to a week or more, and can be done either on camel or on foot. Even if you decide to walk, you’ll need at least one camel for your food and luggage. For detailed information on trekking in this area check out www.discoversinai.net and www.st-katherine.net.

One of the most common circuits goes to the **Galt al-Azraq** (Blue Pools) and takes four to five days. The trail leaves Al-Milga via the man-made **Abu Giffa Pass** and goes through **Wadi Tubug**, taking a detour around **Wadi Shagg**, where there are springs, waterholes and lush, walled gardens (bustans). The walk then goes through the picturesque **Wadi Zuweitin** (Valley of the Olives), with ancient olive trees said by local Bedouin to have been planted by the founder of the Jabaliyya tribe. The first night is often spent here, and there is a small stone hut in which hikers can sometimes sleep. The hike continues through **Wadi Gibal**, through high passes and along the valleys of **Farsh Asara** and **Farsh Arnab**. Many hikers then climb either **Ras Abu Aida** or **Gebel Abu Gasba** before heading to the spring of **Ain Nagila** and the ruins of a Byzantine monastery at **Bab ad-Dunya** (Gate of the World). On the third day the trail leads to the crystal-clear, icy waters of the **Galt al-Azraq**, a deep, dramatic pool in the rock, before continuing on the fourth day through more dramatic wadis to a camel pass on **Gebel Abbas Basha**. A one-hour hike up a fairly easy but steep path leads to a ruined palace built by the 19th-century viceroy Abbas Hilmi I, with stunning views from the summit (2304m). The trail then goes back to Wadi Zuweitin and retraces its way to Al-Milga.

Other destinations include **Sheikh Awad**, with a sheikh’s tomb and Bedouin settlement; the **Nugra Waterfall**, a difficult-to-reach, rain-fed cascade about 20m high, which is reached through a winding canyon called **Wadi Nugra**; and **Naqb al-Faria**, a camel path with rock inscriptions. A shorter trip is the hike to the top of **Gebel Katarina**, Egypt’s highest peak at 2642m. It takes about five hours to reach the summit along a straightforward but taxing trail. The views from the top are breathtaking, and the panorama can even include the mountains of Saudi Arabia on a clear day. The **Blue Valley**, given its name after a Belgian artist painted the rocks here blue some years ago, is another popular day trip.

All treks must be done with a Bedouin guide, which can be easily arranged in St Katherine using either of the tour companies listed under Tours or through any of the camps and hotels listed.
The majority of visitors arrive at the St Katherine Protectorate on organised tours departing from either Sharm el-Sheikh or Dahab. However, it’s easy to sleep within the confines of the protectorate, and to organise everything independently. Guided treks typically start at around €50 per day including food and equipment. You should also buy firewood here in order to discourage destruction of the few trees in the mountains. Whoever you go with, be sure to register with the police prior to leaving.

Make sure you bring water-purification tablets, unless you want to rely on the mountain springs. You’ll also need comfortable walking boots, a hat and sunglasses, sunblock, a warm jacket, a good sleeping bag and toilet paper. Keep in mind that it can get very cold at night – frost, and even snow, are common in winter.

### THE BEDOUIN OF SINAI

Sinai’s rugged tracts are home to desert dwellers, most of whom live in the north of the peninsula. The Bedouin – whose numbers are variously estimated to be between 80,000 and 300,000 – belong to 14 distinct tribes, most with ties to Bedouin in the Negev, Jordan and northern Saudi Arabia, and each with their own customs and culture. The Sukwarka, who live along the northern coast near Al-Arish, are the largest tribe. Others include the Tarabin, who have territory in both northern and southern Sinai; the Tyaha in the centre of the peninsula who, together with the Tarabin, trace their roots to Palestine; and the Haweitat, centred in an area southeast of Suez, and originally from the Hejaz in Saudi Arabia.

The seven Bedouin tribes in southern Sinai are known collectively as the Towara or ‘Arabs of Al-Tor’, the provincial capital. Of these, the first to settle in Sinai were the Aleiqat and the Suwalha, who arrived soon after the Muslim conquest of Egypt. The largest southern tribe is the Mizena, who are concentrated along the coast between Sharm el-Sheikh and Nuweiba. Some members of the tiny Jabaliyya tribe, centred in the mountains around St Katherine, are said to be descendants of Macedonians sent by Emperor Justinian to build and protect the monastery in the 6th century.

Thanks to centuries of living in the harsh conditions of Sinai, the Bedouin have developed a sophisticated understanding of their environment. Strict laws and traditions govern the use of precious resources. Water use is closely regulated and vegetation carefully conserved, as revealed in the Bedouin adage ‘killing a tree is like killing a soul’. Local life centres on clans and their sheikhs (leaders), and loyalty and hospitality – essential for surviving in the desert – are paramount. Tea is traditionally taken in rounds of three, and traditional dwellings are tents made of woven goat hair, sometimes mixed with sheep wool. Women’s black veils and robes are often elaborately embroidered, with red signifying that they are married, and blue unmarried.

Sinai’s original inhabitants are often left behind in the race to build up the coast, and they are sometimes viewed with distrust because of their ties to tribes in neighbouring countries, and allegations of criminal activity and links to terrorist cells throughout Sinai. Bedouin traditions also tend to come second to the significant economical benefits brought by development in the peninsula – benefits that, according to Bedouin activists, Bedouins are yet to fully experience. Egyptian human rights organisations have also reported ongoing persecution of Bedouin people, including imprisonment without charges, and there have been regular demonstrations by Bedouin claiming mistreatment by the police. These concerns, as well as loss of traditional lands, pollution of fishing areas, and insensitive tourism, have contributed to the sense of marginalisation and unrest.

Fortunately, the news isn’t all bad – indeed, the Bedouin are arguably more organised and unified than they have ever been and there is hope that Egypt’s revolution will, in the end, bring more autonomy for Sinai’s tribes.

Throughout the world – and especially in Egypt – tourism has the power to shape the destinies of communities. Travellers can limit any negative effects by seeking out Bedouin-owned businesses, buying locally, staying informed of prevalent issues and never being afraid to ask questions.
Mountain Tours Office  HIKING
(2/347 0457; www.sheikmousa.com; El-Malga Bedouin Camp) The main hub for trekking activities in the St Katherine region, this office can organise anything from a short afternoon stroll to a multiday itinerary. It can also arrange yoga and meditation retreats, rock climbing and 4WD tours.

Wilderness Ventures Egypt  HIKING
(2/0128 282 7182; www.wilderness-ventures-egypt.com) Working closely with local Jabaliyya Bedouin, this highly recommended company organises a variety of treks, walks and activities inside the St Katherine Protectorate, with a strong focus on Bedouin culture and the history of the area. Of particular note, it runs Sinai’s only proper camel-riding school (where you’ll be taught how to properly handle your trusty steed before setting out on a trek), arranges fascinating evening astronomy sessions where you can learn about Bedouin star lore, and organises walks in the nearby Wadi Itlah gardens where you’ll learn about local flora and medicinal plants before a slap-up lunch in one of the gardens.

Sleeping

Most hotels and guesthouses are based in the village of Al-Milga (Katreen), approximately 3.5km from the monastery.

Al-Karm Ecolodge  LODGE $
(2/0100 132 4693; Sheikh Awaad; r without bathroom incl half/full board per person E£100/120) Surrounded by lush walled gardens in a remote wadi, this Bedouin-owned ecolodge is the perfect spot to sample the tranquility and rugged beauty of southern Sinai. It deserves kudos for its environmental efforts with solar-powered showers, composting toilets, and beautifully designed, simple stone and palm-trunk rooms, decorated with local textiles, that blend into the scenery. Lit only by the flicker of candlelight by night, this is a truly unique spot that is worth the effort to get here. There is plenty of good trekking which can be arranged by the lodge.

Transport here and lodge booking is easiest done through the Mountain Tours Office (above) at Al-Malga in St Katherine, as only minimal English is spoken at the lodge itself. The lodge is only accessible by 4WD. The turn-off is signedpost ‘Garaba Valley’ about 20km from St Katherine on the Wadi Feiran road.

El-Malga Bedouin Camp  HOSTEL $
(2/0100 641 3575; www.sheikmousa.com; dm E£25, s/d E£100/150, without bathroom E£55/85; ⚖) Also the base of the Mountain Tours Office, this popular and friendly camp run by the affable Sheikh Mousa is a backpacker favourite and offers excellent quality for the price. The new-built en suite rooms are large and comfortable while the cheaper rooms all share excellent bathroom facilities with hot water. It’s an easy 500m walk from the bus station.

Monastery Guesthouse  GUESTHOUSE $$
(2/347 0353; St Katherine’s Monastery; s/d US$35/60) A favourite of pilgrims the world over, this guesthouse right next to St Katherine’s Monastery offers well-kept rooms with heaters and blankets to keep out the mountain chill, and a pleasant patio area with views towards the mountains. Meals at the on-site cafeteria are filling and tasty, and lunches can be arranged for a few extra dollars per person. Make sure to ask for a mountain-view rather than a courtyard-view room.

Daniela Village  HOTEL $$
(2/347 0379; www.daniela-hotels.com; s/d half-board US$65/95; ⚖) One of the nicest mid-range hotels in Al-Milga, this reasonably priced three-star affair comprises stone-clad chalets that are scattered around attractive grounds. The on-site bar-restaurant is a popular tourist hang-out, and is especially good if you’re in need of a Stella after an all-night trek. It’s diagonally opposite the hospital and about 1.5km from the bus station.

Desert Fox Camp  HOSTEL $
(2/347 0344; www.desertfoxcamp.com; s/d without bathroom E£30/60) This ultra-friendly and laid-back camp offers a variety of bare-bones basic and battered rooms amid a quiet garden setting. It’s on the way out of Al-Milga on the main road (about 1.5km from the bus station) near the turn-off to the monastery.

Catherine Plaza  HOTEL $$
(2/347 0288; www.catherineplaza.com; s/d half-board US$65/90; ⚖) Al-Milga’s fanciest accommodation option offers decent-sized rooms with rather festive green and red decor and teensy balconies. It’s looking a little rough around the edges these days but the pleasant gardens and friendly service are a bonus.
Eating

In Al-Milga, there’s a bakery opposite the mosque, a couple of simple restaurants and several well-stocked supermarkets – perfect for stocking up on supplies before hitting the trails. Most tourists take their meals at their camp or hotel, or in the monastery’s cafeteria.

If you are spending a little time in St Katherine, don’t miss the opportunity of having lunch, surrounded by shady fruit trees, in the gardens of Wadi Itlah. Local tour company Wilderness Ventures Egypt (p434) can arrange this for you.

Shopping

Fansina Handicrafts (347 0155; Al-Milga; 10am-3pm Sat-Thu) This Bedouin women’s cooperative works with over 300 local women and displays a huge range of their textiles and local handicrafts. It’s signposted on the first left-hand turn coming into town from Desert Fox Camp.

Information

The St Katherine Protectorate Office (347 0032), located near the entrance to Al-Milga, sometimes has informative booklets to four ‘interpretive trails’ established in the area, including one for Mt Sinai. These booklets take you through each trail, explaining flora and fauna as well as sites of historical and religious significance.

The following listings are in the town of Al-Milga.

Banque Misr (beside petrol station) Has an ATM. Also changes US dollars and euro.

Nahda Internet (beside El-Malga Bedouin Camp)

Police (347 0046; beside the St Katherine Protectorate Office)

Post office (beside the bakery)

St Katherine Hospital (347 0263) Provides very basic care only.

Telephone centrale (beside the bakery; 24hr)

Getting There & Away

In addition to the transport options listed here, many hotels and camps in Sinai, as well as travel agencies in Cairo, organise trips to the protectorate.

Bus

East Delta Travel Co (347 0250) has its bus station and ticket office just off the main road in Al-Milga, behind the mosque. There is a daily bus to Cairo (£50, seven hours) at 6am, via Wadi Feiran and Suez (£40, five hours).

There hasn’t been a public bus service between St Katherine and the Sinai coast for well over a year, but during the course of research for this book a local transport initiative, Bedouin Bus (0101 668 4274; www.bedouinbus.com), began operating twice weekly between Al-Milga and Dahab and Nuweiba. To Dahab the bus departs every Tuesday and Friday at 11am, and to Nuweiba at 8am every Wednesday and Sunday. Both cost £50 and take two hours. The bus leaves from next to the bakery (opposite the mosque).

Wadi Feiran

This long valley serves as the main drainage route for the entire high mountain region into the Gulf of Suez. Sinai’s largest oasis, it is lush and very beautiful, containing more than 12,000 date palms, as well as Bedouin communities representing all of Sinai’s tribes. Stone walls surround the palms, and the rocky mountains on each side of the wadi have subtly different colours that stand out at sunrise and sunset, making the landscape even more dramatic.

Feiran also has biblical significance – it is believed to be the Rephidim mentioned in the Old Testament where the Israelites defeated their enemies. Because of this it later became the first Christian stronghold in Sinai. An extensively rebuilt early Christian convent remains from this time, although you need permission from St Katherine’s Monastery if you want to visit.

The valley is also an ideal spot from which to trek into the surrounding mountains. To the south, the 2070m Gebel Serbal (believed by early Christians to have been the real Mt Sinai) is a challenging six-hour hike to the summit along a track also known as Sikket ar-Reshshah. Those who persevere are rewarded with fantastic panoramic views. You must be accompanied by a Bedouin guide for all hikes, which can be arranged either in Al-Milga (at St Katherine) or at the Bedouin Flower Garden Restaurant in Wadi Feiran itself.
Qalaat al-Gindi & Nakhl

In the centre of Sinai, about 80km southeast of the Ahmed Hamdi Tunnel, is Qalaat al-Gindi, which features the 800-year-old Fortress of Saladin (Salah ad-Din). In the 12th century, Muslims from Africa and the Mediterranean streamed across Sinai on their way to Mecca. The three caravan routes they followed all converged at Qalaat al-Gindi, prompting Saladin to build a fortress here to protect the pilgrims making their hajj. He also planned to use the fort, which today is still largely intact, as a base from which to launch attacks on the Crusaders, who had advanced as far as Jerusalem. As it turned out, Saladin managed to evict the Crusaders from the Holy City even before the completion of his fortress. At the time of research, visiting this area is severely restricted and foreigners need to acquire special permission from the military (which is rarely granted).

NORTHERN SINAI

Rarely visited by tourists, northern Sinai has a barren desert interior, much of which is off limits to foreigners, and a palm-fringed Mediterranean coast backed by soft white sands sculpted into low dunes. As a crossroad between Asia and Africa, the coastal highway follows what must be one of history’s oldest march routes. Known in ancient times as the Way of Horus, it was used by the Egyptians, Persians, Greeks, Crusaders and Arab Muslims. In fact, the Copts believe that the infant Jesus also passed along this route with his parents during their flight into Egypt.

Al-Arish

068 / POP 140,000

Much of the north coast of Sinai between Port Fuad and Al-Arish is dominated by the swampy lagoon of Lake Bardawil, separated from the Mediterranean by a limestone ridge. As a result of this inhospitable geography, Al-Arish is the only major city in the region, and by default the capital of North Sinai Governorate. The town’s sprawl of ugly low-rise cement blocks wouldn’t win any design awards but the long palm-fringed (though litter-strewn) coastline is a popular weekend getaway for holidaying Cairenes in summer. The weekly market draws in thousands of Bedouin traders from around the peninsula, making for a vibrant and completely chaotic experience.

The main coastal road, Sharia Fuad Zikry (which changes its name to Sharia al-Geish as it heads north), forms a T-junction with Sharia 23rd of July, which runs a couple of kilometres south – changing name to Sharia Tahrir on the way – to the main market area.

Sights & Activities

Zerenike Protectorate

Stretched along the Mediterranean coast from the eastern edge of Lake Bardawil until about 25km east of Al-Arish is this 220-sq-km protectorate (0100 544 2641; per person/car US$5/5; ☀ sunrise-sunset), a haven for migrating birds and a good destination for nature lovers. There are more than 250 avian species here and for most of the year it’s possible to spot flamingos. The entrance to...
the protectorate, which was established by the Egyptian National Parks Office in 1985, is about 35km east of Al-Arish.

Inside the gates there is a small but highly informative visitors centre (9am-5pm Sat-Thu), with a cafeteria and information about some of the species of birds that stop here as they migrate between Europe and Africa. If you call in advance, you can book simple rooms (per person US$25) and camping (per person US$10). For both options, you’ll need to bring all food and drink with you as there is no restaurant. Basic cooking facilities are available on-site.

If you don’t have your own transport, it’s best to take a taxi from Al-Arish to the park entrance – a one-way trip should cost around E£30.

**Al-Arish Museum**
(Museum)
(Coast rd; adult/student E£20/10, camera E£20; 9.30am-2pm Sat-Thur) This massive, fortress-like building sits on the outskirts of Al-Arish along the coastal road to Rafah. The exhibits span the full breadth of Egypt’s history, from Pharaonic right through to the Islamic era, and are thoughtfully displayed. Unfortunately, due to the lack of visitor numbers, opening hours are haphazard at best.

**Bedouin Market**
(Market)
(9am-2pm Thu) Held at the southern edge of town near the main market (note that it’s signposted in Arabic and in English as the Souq al-Hamis), this fascinating market is a kaleidoscope of colour, smell and sound. Squeezing between the bleating goats, chicken cages and huge mounds of onions, while trying to manoeuvre through the crowds, is an experience itself. Bedouin arrive en masse for the occasion with veiled women trading silver, beadwork and embroidered dresses.

**Sleeping & Eating**

**Macca Hotel**
(0335 2632; Sharia As-Salam; s/d E£105/155; €) The Macca staff members take their ‘welcome to Al-Arish’ commitments seriously and the no-nonsense, spotless rooms help to make this hotel an affordable and comfortable place to bed down. There’s a decent restaurant on-site as well. It’s on a side street off Sharia al-Geish.

**Swiss Inn**
(0335 1321; www.swissinn.net; Sharia Fuad Zikry; s/d US$90/110; €) It may be a tad faded but

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**Getting There & Away**

The main bus and servees stations are next to each other, about 3km southeast of the town centre (about E£5 in a taxi).

**Bus**

East Delta Travel Co (0332 5931) has buses to Cairo (E£30, five hours) departing at 8am and 4pm. Departures to Ismailia (E£15 to E£20, three to four hours) leave at 7am, 10.30am,
11.30am, 1pm, 2pm, 3pm and 4pm. For Suez, change in Ismailia.

Servees
A servees from Al-Arish to Cairo costs around £20 to £25 per person. To Ismailia costs about £15; to Rafah £10.

Getting Around
The main taxi rank and microbus stand is at Midan al-Gamma, near the market at the southern end of town. Microbuses shuttle regularly between here and the beach (50pt).

Rafah
268 / POP 31,500
This coastal town, 48km northeast of Al-Arish, marks the border with the Gaza Strip, an area that is a world away from the relative peace and calm of Sinai. On 28 May 2011 the border between Egypt and Gaza was opened for the first time since Hamas took control of Gaza in 2007. The atmosphere remains tense and the border has been closed without warning several times since then due to security fears.

Crossing the border as a foreigner here requires obtaining permission beforehand. For details on permission, border crossing and warnings, see p522. If you have a pressing reason to head to the border, and have acquired the correct paperwork, you can take the daily servees between Al-Arish and the Rafah border crossing for about £10.

For border-crossing details and warnings, see p522.