

Egypt's Red Sea Coast – One of the World's Top Water Sports Destinations

We look at Egypt's Red Sea coast. Some skeptics dispute the miraculous parting of the Red Sea in biblical times, but all agree that for sailing, diving and fishing – this is one of the best destinations in the world...



Main street of a bazaar at El Dahar, downtown part of Hurghada

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1. Egypt's Red Sea Coast – One of the World's Top Water Sports Destinations

As it was in the days of the early Greeks and Romans, so it is today that Egypt is one of the world's favorite travel destinations. Though the country's biggest draw continues to be the amazing abundance of historical treasures, the destination offers more than just the wonders of antiquity. Of the six tourist super-sites - Cairo, Alexandria, Luxor, Aswan, Hurghada on the Red Sea and Sharm El Sheikh in Sinai; none except Luxor relies entirely on ancient monuments to attract visitors.

The Red Sea is well known to adherents of the great monotheistic religions as the sea that God parted with his own hand so that Moses could lead his brethren across to Sinai. But believers will be scandalized to learn that there are some who do not accept the miraculous parting of sea. Their clever explanation is that the event was possible due to a marshy sea of reeds or high currents that separated the waters. But all agree that for sailing, diving and fishing – it is one of the best destinations in the world.

The Red Sea has since antiquity, been important for political and economic reasons. This long and narrow sea between Africa and the Arabian Peninsula acted as a link between China, India, Persia, the Arabian Gulf and Africa with the Mediterranean. The Red Sea contributed to the development of the Silk Road connecting China and Rome, through India. This road facilitated trade and cultural exchange between the west and China.

The Red Sea was key in the spreading of the Christian faith to Egypt and Ethiopia shortly after the death of Christ. St Mark brought the gospel to the Egyptians around AD 40. The isolation of the Red sea area in Egypt attracted the first Christian hermits. St Anthony – a very devout Egyptian who sought spiritual salvation was attracted by the isolation and austere character of the region. He is credited with founding monasticism. The monastery built by his disciples in the fourth century AD lies at the foot of the plateau of Gebel al-Galala al-Qibliya.

The St Anthony monastery, which is the largest Coptic monastery in Egypt, has over the centuries survived attacks from Bedouins and Muslims. It is today home to monks who carry on the work of the hermit founder. St Paul, a devotee of St Anthony, built the monastery of St Paul near the cave where he lived for nearly 90 years. The two monasteries are 82 km apart by road and can be reached from Zafarana.

Egypt's Red Sea coast runs for 1250 km, from the Gulf of Suez and down to the border with the Sudan. The sea floor averages 500m and at its deepest reaches 2,500m. The sea is still undergoing natural processes that have resulted in volcanic features in the deeper parts and some gain in width. The sea covers part of the Rift Valley. Some scientists are so ambitious for the Red Sea, leading them to speculate that after so much water has passed it will become an ocean.

The Red Sea coast is famed for its crystal clear blue waters and exotic marine life, attracting thousands of tourists yearly. The reputation is well deserved - in 1989, an international panel of scientists picked the north part of the Red Sea as one of the Seven Underwater Wonders of the World. The sea carries over 800 fish, including the lethal stonefish and butterfly fish as well as shark and over 200 coral species. In addition, the shores of the sea are visited by thousands of migrating birds every year and bird watchers are bound to have a good time here.

The waters have a constant temperature of 21- 25 degrees centigrade. Visibility is good at 10-50 m and upto a distance of about 200 m. Visibility is best in summer but can be reduced in spring by plankton growth and sediments. However, the sea is also known for its strong winds and unstable currents. This is the characteristic that appears to give substance to the position of those who disbelieve Moses' miraculous parting of the sea.

So named because of its red tint mountain ranges, the Red Sea is an important tourist destination and is home to a number of resorts, the biggest of which is Hurghada. The coastline is particularly famous for its diving sites, which include Ras Mohammed, Elphinstone, The Brothers and Rocky Island. The Austrian biologist and scuba diver, Hans Hass put the Red Sea in the limelight in the 1950's – and this has resulted in it being one of top diving destinations. The renowned French environment explorer, Jacques Yves Cousteaus, through his writings and movies cemented this reputation.

Egypt's Red Sea has since then experienced rapid development. More hotels and resorts have sprung up here than anywhere else in the country. This growth has however at times resulted in over development and resultant challenge to the environment. An estimated 60% to 80% of the coral reefs around the coast have been damaged due to illegal and irresponsible activities. The authorities have in recent years woken to this reality and this will hopefully lead to restoration and more balanced development in the future.

The major centres along Egypt's Red Sea coast are Ain Sukhana, Berenice, Bir Shalatein, El Gouna, Hurghada, Mersa Alam, Al- Zuseir, Safaga, Suez and Zafarana. Hurghada emerged in early 20th century and was until recently an

isolated fishing village. In terms of historical pedigree it cannot hold its own against some of the other Red Sea towns such as Berenice which was founded in 275 BC by the Ptolemy II Philadelphus during the Greek period. But from the 1980's onwards, the city has prospered and is now the leading resort along the Red Sea coast. Hurghada lies 380 km to the southeast of Cairo

Hurghada has today a population of 40,000 and is home to numerous hotels and resorts offering first class water sports facilities for sail boarding, windsurfing, yachting, deep-sea fishing, scuba diving and snorkeling. If you do not want to get wet, you can still catch a glimpse of the impressive diversity of marine creatures by visiting Hurghada's aquarium and museum. The aquarium has a wide selection of fish and various other odd- looking yet fascinating marine creatures. Sunbathers will also find excellent white sand beaches. The resort has a good choice of bars, restaurants, boutiques, and discos and is well known for its vibrant nightlife.

From the city you can access numerous uninhabited off shore reefs and islands. They offer a wide array of exciting activities. At Giftun Island you can indulge in snorkeling and view the Red Sea underworld from a submarine! The Island is lined with shops and boutiques, which will allow some retail therapy. There are also some historical sites such as the Roman era porphyry quarry remains at nearby Gebel Abu Dukhan. In addition, you can take day trips to explore the Red Sea Mountains by camel or jeep.

Between El Gouna and Safaga, is an area that is known as Europe's playground. The area boasts among other things an airport, a hospital, an open- air amphitheatre, and golf course. It is an area frequented by the rich and famous and is host to concerts and sporting events. The beaches are clean and a perfect getaway from the hustle and bustle of inner town. Safaga- 60 km from Hurgada, specialises in diving. On account of its pristine beaches and strong breezes, it was chosen as the venue for the 1993 World Windsurfing Championships.

You will find El Gouna 20 km to the north of Hurghada. This is a purpose built leisure resort that boasts of 10 km of beachfront. It has international standard diving facilities and a myriad of opportunities for windsurfing, snorkeling, parasailing, and water skiing. Golfer may also relax at the El Gouna's 18-hole USPGA Golf Course.

The area is also home to islands - Shadwan Island, Shaab Abu Shiban, Shaab el-Erg, Umm Gammar Island, which are all famous for snorkeling, diving and fishing. The southern side of the Red Sea coast is more tranquil than the central areas and is popular with honeymooners. Here you enjoy breathtaking nature, excellent resorts and good diving sites. For those on a spiritual journey, the Red Sea coast is home to Coptic Christian monasteries, which are the oldest

monasteries in Egypt as well as the whole of Christendom. You can view the monasteries by taking a hike overseen by the monks and novices residing within.

There are few international flights to Hurghada, though most visitors fly or travel overland by bus from Cairo. There are a variety of [hotels and resorts in the Red Sea](#) area- with Hurghada having the largest share. In this city, you will find top tier international chain accommodation and other digs suitable for budget travelers. To get more value from your trip to the region, you can add on a [Nile cruise](#)- the best way to experience the wonders of ancient Egypt.

The best time to visit the Red Sea coast is March to May and September to November. In these periods, you enjoy warm days and your fellow tourists are mercifully away. The summer months are uncomfortably hot and humid, while winter days can be chilly especially in the evenings. Remember to pack cameras to capture images and sunglasses for protection against the scorching sun, light clothing, hats and some sunscreen.

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2. Destination Facts: Egypt

Full Country Name: Arab Republic of Egypt

Area: 1,001,450 sq km

Population: 66.5 million (2001)

Capital City: Cairo

Other Major Towns: Alexandria, Luxor, Aswan, Port Said

Peoples: Eastern Hamitic -Egyptians, Bedouins, and Berbers - 99%, Greek, Nubian, Armenian, other European - 1%

Language: Arabic (official), English and French - widely understood

Religion: Muslim (mostly Sunni) -94%, Christian (Coptic) and other - 6%

Government: Republic

Time: GMT + 2 hours (GMT + 3 for May to September)

Currency: Egyptian Pounds (LE)

Electricity: 220 V, 50Hz

Weights and Measures: Metric

Economy: Agriculture, mining, oil, tourism, industry (cement, textiles, fertilizer, rubber)

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3. Travel Basics: Egypt

Health

Visitors over 1 year of age entering Egypt from yellow fever infected areas require yellow fever international certificate of vaccination. Such areas include: all countries in Africa south of the Sahara with the exception of Mauritania and a few counties in southern Africa and some selected countries in central and southern America. Cholera is a health risk in the country and precautions are essential. There is limited risk of malaria in the El Faiyoum area, particularly in the period June to October. Cairo and Alexandria are considered Malaria free.

It is recommended, that you take vaccinations against hepatitis B, polio and typhoid. The Nile Valley and Nile Delta are associated with risk of Bilharzia. You are advised not to swim or paddle in these areas except in well-chlorinated and maintained swimming pools. There are good hospitals and chemists in all the major towns.

Visas

All visitors require a visa except for citizens of some selected countries staying for various defined periods, up to a maximum of 6 months. Those covered by this conditional exemption include nationals of the Arab countries of Yemen, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Libya, Kuwait, Jordan, Bahrain, Oman and Yemen. Other countries are Djibouti, Macau, Guinea and Malaysia.

Airport visas may be available for citizens of the UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States. This may however result in delays upon arrival and your airline may in any case not allow you to board without a visa. Whenever possible it is advisable to obtain visas in advance. Visa requirements vary from time to time and you are advised to check on prevailing status well ahead of travel.

Your passport should be valid for 6 months from date of entry and at least 1 week beyond the expected date of exit.

Peoples & Culture

By far, the majority of the people of Egypt are of Eastern Hamitic stock. Nubians, whose homeland is in the south of the country, Greeks, Armenians other Europeans represent the remainder. Though somewhat simplistic, four cultural groups can be delineated - Egyptian peasants or fellahin, Copts, Bedouins and Nubians. Fellahin is a rather dated classification as the majority of such people have immigrated to cities and transformed themselves. The traditional fellahin can however still be found in rural areas eking out a living from the land as they have done from the days of the Pharaohs. Copts are Christian adherents of the Eastern Orthodox Church. But they are of the same race and culture as other

Egyptians.

Bedouins are a nomadic people who search the deserts for grazing and water for their camels and other livestock. Nobody really knows the desert more than the Bedouin. They know where to find water and get around by navigating by the stars. Like all nomads, they live a free and hardy lifestyle, and consider the sedentary ways of their compatriots as lacking in grace and dignity. But they also realize the advantages of a settled life and they have increasingly responded to efforts to ground them and give their children an education.

The Nubian are a dark skinned people whose ancestral land is to the south of Aswan. They have little relationship, cultural or genetic with other dark skinned Africans. Back in the days of the Pharaohs, they served very well in the military. In more recent times, they farmed the banks of the Nile River. Their lands have been mostly been inundated by the raising of the Aswan High Dam. Most Nubians have now migrated to towns and their lifestyle has changed.

Islam is the single most important influence on culture in Egypt. And this applies even for non-adherents like Coptic Christians. Perhaps for this reason, crime is virtually nonexistent. The society is conservative, especially on issues related to women. Women are expected to be modest in dress and manner- no flimsy attire or loud talking and laughing, for example. The men are very happy with their position in this patriarchal society. The people are generally friendly, hospitable and very accommodating especially towards visitors. But visitors need to keep their religion to themselves- proselytizing is illegal here.

The Lingua Franca is Arabic. But there are two versions- classical Arabic, the language of the Koran and the colloquial Arabic used in the street. English and French are widely used for business and by educated urbanites. In terms of culture, is important in the Arab world. And books, movies, music and TV programs produced here are popular throughout the Arabic speaking nations of the Middle East. The prolific Naguib Mahfouz gained worldwide fame and prestige when he won the literature Nobel Prize in 1998 for his book "The Cairo Trilogy". His works are however not very popular with religious radicals and an attempt was made in 1995 to rub him out.

Egyptian cuisine is to the best tradition of Middle East cooking. You are advised to try local specialties such as roast pigeon, grilled aubergines, kebabs and chickpeas. The hotels in the tourist areas serve cosmopolitan fare. Though this is a Muslim country, imbibers of alcohol will not go thirsty. Beers, wines and other drinks are available in bars and restaurants, especially at hotels catering for tourists. But you should defer to local sensitivities and avoid drinking in daylight hours in the month of Ramadan.

Communications

Telephone, fax, telegram, and post services are available in the principal urban centers. International direct dialing to most countries is available. You will find Internet cafes in the main urban centres and at tourist hotels. The country code for Egypt is 20.

Mobile phones are based on GSM 900 network. Coverage tends to map the population and therefore extends to Alexandria, Cairo, Luxor, Aswan, and the main towns along the Nile and parts of the Red Sea area from Suez to Sharm el-Sheikh. You are however advised to check beforehand whether your GSM phone is usable if you are traveling outside any of the areas specifically mentioned here. Network service providers include Vodafone Egypt (www.vodafone.com.eg) and ECMS-MobiNil (www.mobinil.com).

Accommodation

Tourism is a serious business in Egypt. You will find a wide variety of accommodation ranging from 5-star luxury to budget stay in the main cities and locations popular with visitors. This in particular covers: Cairo, Alexandria and the north coast, Luxor, Aswan and at the Red Sea and Sinai resorts towns. Approved campsites are few in the country. During the popular winter season, advance booking is advised. Egypt is very good value and you will find accommodation cheaper here than the equivalent in most other destinations. See our [Egypt Hotels & Resorts](#) page to view info and book accommodation for your stay in Egypt.

Money

The local currency is the Egyptian Pound (LE). There are no restrictions on the import and export of foreign currency. The export of local currency is however prohibited.

Major currencies such as US dollars and Euro and travelers cheques can be converted at banks and forex bureaus in the main towns and tourist areas. You will get best exchange rates for cash or travelers cheques if you are dealing in US dollars, Euro or Pound Sterling. Visa, Mastercard, American Express and Diners Club are accepted at various stores and hotels. Your Visa and Mastercard can be used to access cash at a limited number of bank outlets –particularly for Banque Misr and Bank of Egypt.

Climate

The summer, which falls between April and October, is hot and dry. The winter months are mild with cold nights. You will be surprised to learn that there is virtually no rain in this country. The best time to visit is between November and March, outside the intolerable summer season. Beware of the khamsin, the hot dry wind that blows from the Sahara around April. This treacherous wind creates

dust storms that can reduce visibility to less than 30 metres. In terms of weather, the Red Sea coast is most favoured and it is pleasant year round. In Cairo, winter temperatures range from lows of 9°C at night to highs of 25°C, while summers vary between 9°C and 35°C.

International Travel

All the main air carriers, including Air France, British Airways, JAT, KLM, Lufthansa and SWISS, compete for the more than 4 million tourists who visit Egypt annually. The national airline is Egypt Air. There are a small number of charter flights flying in not only to Cairo but also to Alexandria, Luxor, and Sharm el-Sheikh directly from European airports.

There are ferry services connecting Egypt to Saudi Arabia, Jordan and also the Sudan. Some cruise ships stop over at Egypt as part of their African sailing itinerary. You can travel to Libya and Israel by road from Egypt. There is a coach service operating between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem in Israel and Cairo via El Arish and Rafiah in Sinai. You can also use a private vehicle to reach Israel through Eilat via Suez and Taba.

Local Travel

Virtually every significant town in the country can be reached by bus. This is the cheapest way to travel around Egypt. Some of the buses have onboard videos that play Indian and Arabic movies at top volume, presumably to entertain customers. This can be quite an annoyance for visitors. This is why you may consider using the luxury shuttle services, which operate to and from Cairo, Alexandria, the Nile Valley and the Red Sea, Sinai, and Suez Canal cities.

You can also get to most towns in the country by standard trains, whose hub is Cairo. Luxury air-conditioned trains run from Cairo to Luxor and Aswan and are used as an alternative to flying to these popular tourist locations. Alexandria too can be reached from Cairo by using luxury trains. Within Cairo, you can use the metro, which is clean, reliable and inexpensive. Luxury ferry service links Aswan and Luxor along the Nile. The adventurous and thrifty can also sail along the Nile by using traditional boats, feluccas.

Rental cars can give you some freedom from the schedule of bus and train services. If you pick this option, it is advisable that you rent a car together with a driver. Driving in Egypt is very aggressive and few visitors within their short stay are able to gain the necessary experience to drive around safely. Generally, road links are good throughout the main population centres. Driving is on the right.

Egypt Air operates daily flights linking Cairo with the main locations popular with tourists. This includes Alexandria, Luxor, Aswan, Abu Simbel, and Hurghada. Air Sinai, flies to Sinai and Red Sea towns and resorts, particularly Eilat, Hurghada,

St Catherine, Sharm el-Sheikh and Taba.

Travel Insurance

Health and travel insurance are recommended. Ensure your travel insurance includes emergency evacuation.

What to Wear

Light clothing is generally recommended for Egypt's warm climate. You may however need a sweater and jacket for winter evenings. Remember that this is a Muslim country and dress should be conservative. Women in particular are expected to dress modestly. All the same, immodest western style holiday dress is acceptable in nightclubs, beaches and hotels in Cairo and other locations frequented by tourists.

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4. About Africa Point

Africapoint.com is an Africa specialist travel agent, offering travel services through the company website -Africapoint.com and also offline. This pioneering Africa travel website has been assisting travelers make bookings online since early 1999.

The company was started in 1997 has its central reservations office strategically located in Nairobi, Kenya. The company is supported by a network of partner offices in the leading destinations in Africa. This includes Cape Town (South Africa), Arusha, Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), Cairo (Egypt), Kampala (Uganda), Victoria (Seychelles), Harare (Zimbabwe). We are members of the American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA).

What services do we offer?

We provide reservation services for hotels, airline tickets, rental cars, tours and safaris to the top destinations in Africa. Among the countries we are currently covering are Kenya, South Africa, Egypt, Tanzania, Seychelles, Zimbabwe, Uganda and Mauritius.

We have special discounts for most of the services we offer and some of our prices are upto 50% off standard rates. Please visit our website to view the links of all the services we offer.

How do we make your Africa travel planning easier?

Ours is one of very few websites offering one-stop travel booking and information service to a number of different African countries. In addition:

- We know our destinations and our products **very well**. We are in a position to give you good advice on the best hotel, rental car, tour or safari to suit your particular requirements.
- We are committed to working to the highest industry standards. We have many our past clients who are happy to share their experiences with you. Please visit the [Client Profile & Testimonials](#) page and see what some of our clients have to say.
- Our patience is the stuff of legend! We will patiently seek to answer all your queries until you are ready to pick what is most suitable for your needs. For high value items such as safaris we have communicated with our clients for 6 months and even longer before they are ready to buy.

Others have come back to and said: "Do you remember that tour we discussed 2 years ago? I am now ready to travel." And of course we remember. We always remember!

- Together with our partners, we are based in the African destination whose travel services we are selling. For this reason we are usually able to get you very good prices. For some products our prices are **40-50%** below standard rates.
- As members of **ASTA (American Society of Travel Agents)** we are committed to upholding **ASTA's** motto of " Integrity in Travel" and operate to those same standards you would expect from an ASTA member anywhere in the world.

One of our North American clients for whose 36 person missionary group we provided an air charter, hotel booking, safari and road transport to 2 African countries had this to say.

"My experience with Africapoint.com was good as any service that I've received any where in the USA. Not only were they helpful before and during, but they went out of their way to also be helpful afterwards.

I'm using them again for an upcoming trip in November and will look forward to using them for years to come."

In addition our membership of ASTA assures you of a **neutral and trusted** arbitrator in the event that a disagreement occurs between us.

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5. Forward This Report

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