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**Amazing Egypt – More than Just the Wonders of Antiquity**

**By Andrew Muigai**

Egypt is one of the most fascinating destinations on the world tourist map. This extra ordinary

country is today the favourite vacation spot for many, just like it was in the days of the early Greeks and Romans. The thoroughly cultured Greeks, in particular, were fascinated by this civilization that predated theirs by at least 2000 years. The biggest draw continues to be the amazing abundance of historical treasures– temples, pyramids and museums –contained in this one country. But the destination offers more than just the wonders of antiquity. Your visit to Egypt can be rounded off by a cruise down the Nile and a beach vacation at the top notch Red Sea and Sinai resorts.

The unification of the Kingdoms of Lower and Upper Egypt around BC 3180 marks the point from when Egypt became a significant power. This event is credited with Menes, who thus became the first Pharaoh. Menes went on to establish a new capital at Memphis, just to the south of where Cairo stands today. For the next 3000 years and under 30 dynasties of the Pharaohs, a dynamic and culturally sophisticated civilization flourished. It was not however smooth sailing for the descendants of Menes and power was for short periods in the hands of foreigners. Historians as usual want to simplify things and have now divided up the reign of the Pharaohs into three periods: the Old Kingdom (2575–2134 BC), Middle Kingdom (2040–1640 BC) and New Kingdom (1550–1070 BC).

It is a curious fact that most monuments of the Pharaohs relate to death. Though moderns may see this as an unhealthy preoccupation with death, some scholars see it as an indication of the ancient Egyptians great love for life and desire for continued existence. The pyramid was the highest evolution in the practice of preparing elaborate tombs for the departed. Pyramids were the final resting place, from where the Pharaohs enjoyed the afterlife. The most famous of these edifices are the Pyramids of Giza, built in the 4th Dynasty (2575–2465 BC), when the power of these ancient kings was at its peak.

Religion was another reason for the great monuments of ancient Egypt. The deities found deserving of worship were truly diverse. And many, many temples were built in honour of these gods. Temples for the most esteemed gods were quite elaborate and were administered by high priests. Auxiliary buildings housed libraries, granaries, and what may today be considered as research laboratories for astronomers, biologists and other scientists. Most gods were linked with specific animals and to whom special powers were attributed. Some gods came and went but the sun god was one of the most

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enduring. It has been suggested that the design of the pyramids had some association with practices of the sun cult. The Pharaoh was considered to be a living god.

The Greeks, in the name of Alexander the Great finally brought the Age of the Pharaohs to an end in 332 BC. He founded that city that bears his name, Alexandria. The Greeks ushered in a period of comparative prosperity and stability under descendants of Ptolemy. Ptolemy was the Macedonian general who was appointed by Alexander as governor. The Pharos Lighthouse, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and the Great Library of Alexandria were built in this era.

As the Greeks declined, so did the Romans rise, and they too cast a covetous eye upon Egypt. The last of the Ptolomies was the notorious Cleopatra, lover to both Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. The Roman Empire too declined Egypt was torn apart by foreign armies. The most significant event at this time was the invasion of the Arabs in 622 AD. Though other foreigners including Ottoman Turks, French and British, subsequently ruled the country, it is the Arabs who brought Islam whose legacy has

been the most enduring.

Egypt is today a modern vibrant nation that carries the burden of its 5,000-year history graciously. Just like in ancient times, the Nile sustains the country and upto 95% of the population live in close proximity of the river. The rest of the country is desolate desert, mitigated only by a few isolated oases and the habitable narrow strips along the African Red Sea and the Mediterranean coastlines. According to the tourism ministry, Egypt for the visitor is best seen as six tourist super-sites. This covers the most popular destinations and excludes off-the-beaten-track locations. The six super-sites are anchored on: Cairo, Alexandria, Luxor, Aswan, Hurghada on the Red Sea and Sharm El Sheikh in Sinai. Except for Luxor, none of these destinations relies entirely on ancient monuments to attract visitors. See the Egypt Tours and Vacations page of our website to view info and make a reservation for these destinations.

Cairo is a huge, sprawling and chaotic metropolis. It has all the amenities of a modern city and is the usual gateway for the visitor to Egypt. Cairo is a young city relative to nearby Heliopolis, Giza and Memphis that are associated with the Pharaohs. The city began as a Roman trading post called Babylon- in the area now referred to as Coptic Cairo. This area was a settlement of one of the world's first Christian communities. This predominantly Christian locale houses a museum that is a repository of religious art, manuscripts, paintings and pottery.

But it is the Arab invaders who arrived in the 7th century who can be said to have founded the city. They settled just north of the area referred to as Old Cairo. The medieval district of Islamic Cairo is densely packed with people and lots of mosques and temples. This is where many still go during the month of Ramadan to eat and spend the night after a days' fast. Giza on the Niles' west bank is where you will find the Great Pyramids. These truly magnificent monuments were one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. You will appreciate the achievement of the builders of these edifices when you reflect on the fact that until the 19th century they were the world's largest buildings.

The visitor to Cairo will easily tuck in trips to see museums, mosques and monuments such as Pyramids and the Sphinx. To commemorate your visit to this unforgettable city, visit the Khan el-Khalili

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Bazaar. The wide array of souvenirs on sale here includes jewelry, brass, silver and copperware, carpets, perfumes, alabaster and soapstone carvings. You will also find reproductions of antiquities, which you are advised to buy as opposed to anything presented as original. Such "originals" are usually counterfeit, and it is in any case illegal to export the real article.

Alexandria, monument to Alexander the Great, is located 180 km to the northwest of Cairo. The city has a Mediterranean temper and compared to the hothouse of Cairo has a cooler and more pleasant climate. The Greco–Roman Museum is within central Alexandria and has on display artifacts from the period 300 BC to AD 300. You will see mummies, sarcophaguses, pottery, tapestries and the granite sculpture of the bull god Apis. Other sights in this area include the Roman Amphitheater, the Royal Jewelry Museum and the Roman era catacombs of Kom el–Shukafa.

The island of Pharos, near the harbour is the site of the Great Lighthouse, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Today, what remains on the site is a 15th century fortress. After immersing yourself in antiquity, you take a dip at some beach resorts within 20 km to the west of the city. At the resort of Marsa Matruh, 230 km further on, you will find some excellent beaches and an opportunity for reef diving. This area right from Alexandria along the coast is part of Egypt's Med. It is still relatively undeveloped despite long stretches of white sand beaches and turquoise waters.

If your primary interest is ancient Egypt, bear in mind that about 80% of Egyptian antiquities are in the vicinity of Luxor. The city sits on the site of the ancient city of Thebes and together with the surrounding areas carries magnificent treasures of antiquity such as palaces, temples and royal tombs. The royals of those times whiled their afterlife at what is referred today as the Valley of the Kings, Valley of the Queens and Tombs of the Nobles. The tombs contained treasure that has been plundered over the centuries. Some of the more famous tombs are those of the boy king Tutankhamen and the queen Nefertari.

On the east bank of the Nile you find the Temple of Luxor and the Temple of Karnak, packed with obelisks, wall murals and statues with heads of gods. If you overnight here, enjoy the evening sound–and–light show at the Temple of Karnak. Temples on the west bank are Queen Hatshepsut's Temple and The Ramesseum, a once massive edifice that is today mostly a ruin. You need to spend at least two days here for your trip to be worthwhile. You are also advised to hire a guide who can explain the historical context of each artifact or monuments. Start out early each day before the airlifted day–trippers arrive to crowd you out.

Aswan, a scenic town by the Nile lies 680 km to the south of Cairo, in the region that was so long ago known as Lower Egypt. Though not as numerous as elsewhere, you can find temples and tombs at those two islands in the Nile– Elephantine and Kitcheners islands. You can get to the islands by sailing in a felucca. The Nubian Museum celebrates the history and culture of the Nubian people. Aswan is also important in the history of Coptic Christians and the ruins of the 7th–century Coptic monastery of St. Simeon laze in this area. In today's Egypt, Aswan is important as the location of the High Dam that finally put an end to the annual bursting of the banks of the Nile.

The Red Sea is well known to readers of the Bible as the sea that God parted with his own hand so that Moses and his people could cross over to Sinai. So named because of its red tint mountain

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ranges, it is home to a number of resorts, the biggest of which is Hurghada. The underwater world of the Red Sea is alive with over 800 fish species and the deep-sea fishing is excellent. Snorkellers can explore the coral reef that is reputed to be one of the finest in the world. Hurghada aside, there are other resorts in the area that have good beaches, coral reefs and some golfing too. The modern day traveler escaping the city will empathise with the early Christian hermits who built their monasteries here as they sought to get away from it all. Hurghada lies 380 km to the southeast of Cairo.

Sinai is where Africa meets Asia. Like the Red Sea coast, it has top resorts and is great for water sports. Sharm El Sheikh, towards the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula is the most developed resort town. Here you will find entertainment in the form of casinos and nightclubs and also some good shopping malls. The marine life is abundant and the coral reefs are great. Sinai is also where the three great monotheistic religions meet. You can make an excursion to Mt. Horeb, said to be Mt. Sinai where Moses received the Ten Commandments. For Roman Catholics, emulate Pope John Paul II who visited nearby St. Catherine's Monastery in 2000. The monastery is supposed to sit on the site of Moses' burning bush.

The people of Egypt from antiquity to the present day have always built their lives around the Nile. It is no coincidence therefore, that probably the best way to see the major sites is by taking a Nile Cruise. There are several luxury cruise ships offering Nile Cruises. The longer cruise goes all the way from Cairo to Aswan in two weeks. There is however not much to see between Cairo and Luxor and you will have better value if you take the shorter cruise between Luxor and Aswan. This cruise, which normally takes six days, goes in both directions and you can embark at either Aswan or Luxor. You can get to Luxor or Aswan from Cairo by taking a flight or the overnight sleeper train. The adventurous and thrifty

can also sail along the Nile by using traditional boats, feluccas.

The summer in Egypt, which falls between April and October, is hot and dry. The winters are mild with cold nights. The best time to visit is between November and March, outside the intolerable summer season. Light clothing is generally recommended though you may need a sweater and jacket for winter evenings. Remember that this is a Muslim country and dress for women in particular is expected to be modest. All the same, immodest western style holiday dress is acceptable in nightclubs, beaches and hotels in Cairo and other locations frequented by tourists.

In the cities and locations popular with tourists, you will find a wide variety of accommodation ranging from 5-star luxury to budget lodging. This in particular covers: Cairo, Alexandria and the north coast, Luxor, Aswan and at the Red Sea and Sinai resorts towns. 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.

Andrew Muigai is editor of AfricaPoint Insider online newsletter. It is part of AfricaPoint.com– the Africa travel website that has helped thousands of travelers discover Africa. You can view more info on Egypt tours and vacations at the website.

<http://www.africapoint.com/tours1/egyptour.htm>

## **Egypt : Land Before Time**

**By Steven N. Ng**

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In recent years, the number of people touring Egypt has slowly dwindled. This is most likely due to the violence in the Middle Eastern region and the few bombings and kidnappings that have occurred in recent years. However, these cases are pretty much isolated, and the thousands of people who visit Egypt every year thoroughly enjoy their experience there.

Egypt is famous for a lot of things, from their exotic perfumes, fine cotton, and the mysteries of mummification and their ancient religion. However, I would like to focus on the architectural and engineering wonders of the Egyptian civilization. When the tribes in Europe and Africa were still building huts and shelters, the Egyptians have already constructed monstrous monuments hundreds of feet in height and width. It is this superiority that has elevated the ancient Egyptian civilization as one of the greatest civilizations in the world.

#### The Great Pyramids of Giza

By far the most famous of Egypt's architectural wonders are the 3 Great Pyramids located at Giza, near Cairo. These monuments are hundreds of feet in height, and have survived the test of time for the last 4500 years. There are over a hundred pyramids of various sizes in Egypt, and more in neighboring Sudan. These monuments serve as tombs for the great pharaohs of ancient Egypt, and stand as testimony to the power and influence of these pharaohs.

When you stand at the bottom of the Great Pyramids, looking up at their magnificence, the feeling is indescribable. You begin to wonder just how the ancient people managed to construct this huge structure with only the help of the simple tools available at that time. And this feeling of awe intensifies when you take the opportunity to descend into the pyramids via the original entrances that were used thousands of years ago. When you touch the walls of the now-empty tombs beneath the pyramids, you will feel as if you were there thousands of years ago when the tombs were freshly carved. (One warning: You might not want to enter the pyramids if you are claustrophobic!)

#### The Sphinx

Next to the Great Pyramids at Giza is the enigmatic Sphinx. A gigantic statue with the head of a man and the body of a lion, the great Sphinx stares silently at the east, perhaps watching the sunrise, or perhaps protecting the great pyramids from whatever evils that may threaten to destroy them. The Sphinx is just as old as the pyramids, aging over 4500 years (or more, depending on which group of archaeologists you believe).

Almost everyone has heard of the Sphinx with its missing nose, and some might wonder how he actually lost his nose. (Do not believe what you saw in the Disney cartoon Aladdin) Almost everyone has seen many pictures, or perhaps the Discovery channel, showing the Sphinx in various angles. But you have to visit it, to stand there right next to it, to realize why both the Sphinx and the Pyramids are

the most famous man-made structures in the world. Just the front paw of the Sphinx is larger than a human being!

### The Wonders of the Nile

The architectural wonders of ancient Egypt are not limited to those at Giza. As you travel along the Nile River (incidentally the longest river in the world), you will come across other monuments. Chief of these is the Valley of Kings near Luxor. It is here that many kings from many of the ancient Egyptian dynasties were entombed. Each tomb is unique and is a wonder in its own right. Unfortunately, most of the treasure that was entombed with the pharaohs have long been stolen by tomb raiders. Only the well-hidden tomb of Tutankhamun managed to survive more or less intact to this day.

Further south, near the town of Aswan, are the famous temples of Abu Simbel. Constructed during the reign of Ramses II, better known as Ramses the Great, these two temples feature much-larger-than-life statues guarding the entrances. And beautiful hieroglyphs still adorn the walls of the temples.

The few monuments I've mentioned are just a small fraction of the many wonders that can be found in Egypt. If you have any interest in ancient civilizations, or want to know more about the wonders of ancient Egypt, you owe it to yourself to visit this ancient land before its wonders are eventually swept away by the sands of time.

If you would like to know more about the wonders of Egypt, do check out the following sites:

Pyramids of Giza [http://www.nekhebet.com/w\\_pyramids.html](http://www.nekhebet.com/w_pyramids.html)

Sphinx [http://www.nekhebet.com/w\\_sphinx.html](http://www.nekhebet.com/w_sphinx.html)

Nile River [http://www.nekhebet.com/w\\_nile.html](http://www.nekhebet.com/w_nile.html)

And if you want to learn more about the other aspects of Egypt, do visit <http://www.nekhebet.com>

Steven maintains the informational website Wonders of Ancient Egypt at <http://www.nekhebet.com>. Do visit if you want to find out more about the wonders of Egypt such as the Pyramids and the Lighthouse; or mysteries such as mummification and conspiracy theories; or its religion and history.



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