

Egypt's exotic HIDEAWAYS

By Sally Mansour

'Egypt's Hidden Gems'. 'Egypt Undiscovered'. 'Places You Won't Believe Are in Egypt'. These are a few examples of articles and posts I have been happily noticing and following recently. Moving away from the 'Big Four' (Luxor, Aswan, Hurghada, Sharm El Sheikh) those articles are telling us that there is so much more to see and many more destinations to explore in this spectacular country.

But with the fact that these spots are less known, also comes the fact that planning trips is not as easy. Without much information on how to get there and where to stay, these places can stay on your mental bucket list forever! Well, I thought so too until I did some research and talked to a few non-conventional experts on local travel.

And so here you go, a guide to a number of exotic destinations, taking you across Egypt from East to West!



Mangrove trees
at Wadi El Gemal.
Photo courtesy of
Rowan Al Shimi

WADI EL GEMAL NATIONAL PARK

This place can be truly dubbed the 'Galapagos' of Egypt with its extremely rich nature and wildlife. It is a nature reserve found along the Red Sea coast, south of Marsa Alam. A perfect spot for nature explorers and hikers, it's a place that has it all: a coastal mangrove, several islands (Wadi El Gemal island is a must visit), hundreds of bird species, desert valleys and a number of endangered land animals (gazelles are one example!).

The logistics: Have your stay in Marsa Alam and organise an excursion from there. A 4x4 ride should take less than an hour using the coastal road to get to the main entrance. After some touring/hiking you can go for a midday rest at Al Fustat eco-lodge. It is highly recommended to make the trip with a local tour guide, who you can contact through your hotel in Marsa Alam.

a one of a kind sanctuary known as Al Tarfa Lodge. You can stay in one of its luxurious rooms and suites

The very blue Blue Lagoon



THE BLUE LAGOON This is a secluded water spot located in South Sinai close to Dahab. The incredibly flat blue water surface and strong wind makes it the ultimate haven for wind and kite surfing (the latest water sports taking Egypt by storm!).

The logistics: Stay in Dahab and do a day trip from there. The easiest way to get there is to take a four-wheel drive for around two hours. If you are looking for a more challenging experience then you can take the hiking route which takes at least one night (recommended). Start off with a ride to the Blue Hole (a famous diving destination), then a hike for around two hours to Abu Galum (a protected national park and another great diving destination). After some rest take another one hour hike to the Blue Lagoon and stay there overnight in huts found on its beach. Excursion centres in Dahab can organise these trips and will provide you with needed equipment.

AL DAKHLA OASIS Along with Al Kharga, Al Farafra and Al Bahareya, these oases situated in the Western Desert have had a fairer share of spotlight compared to the other destinations. Yet 'assumed' remoteness is still a barrier for lots of people. Al Dakhla is commonly labelled 'Egypt's most beautiful oasis' and gives access to various attractions in the Western Desert. While there you can go to Al Qasr Fortress, neighbouring Kharga Oasis, the White Desert and the Gif El Kebir National Park.

The Logistics: Al Dakhla further stands out by having



Al Dakhla Oasis

TRAVEL

(recommendation is 4-5 days or more) and take daily trips to your selected sites.

There are two options to get there: You can fly with Egyptair (on certain days) to Assuit airport, or take the charter flight (organized by Al Tarfa and also available on certain days) to Al Kharga airport. The lodge takes care of transportation from the airport to their location (just make sure you make pre-arrangements).

TUNIS VILLAGE The closest spot for Cairo residents, Tunis village or Izbet Tunis is found in Fayoum just south of Cairo. Over the years this special little village overseeing Lake Qaroun has attracted artists and intellectuals who have turned

Tunis Village Fayoum



Artistic locally made pottery from Tunis Village.
Photo courtesy of Dan Mason

it into an art centre, especially for pottery. Enjoy a walk through this picturesque village, visit its various pottery studios and take home a memorable work of art locally made.

The logistics: A private car, cab or micro-bus can be taken from Cairo. The ride takes around two hours down Al Fayoum desert road. Zad Al Mosafer Ecolodge is conveniently situated in the village for an afternoon meal and rest or an overnight stay and offers various activities and entertainment options.

Sally Mansour is a Travel Blogger and Trip Planner.
Check out her website at www.salstravelbox.com