

# Around Cairo



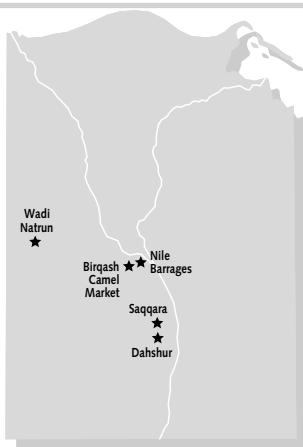
Held hostage by Cairo's endless charms (or perhaps desperate to flee in search of more relaxed locales), too few travellers explore the capital's surrounding countryside. However, those who manage to escape from the urban sprawl discover a serene landscape of luscious green fields and palm groves that end abruptly at the edges of the vast desert. And importantly, the outskirts of Cairo are home to some of the oldest and most impressive ancient sites in Egypt.

On the southern edge of the city limits lies the city of Memphis, which was once the mighty capital of the Old Kingdom. Unfortunately, little remains of this famed city of power and wealth, though the surrounding desert pays eloquent visual testimony to the early pharaohs' dreams of eternal life. Here, on the edge of expansive sand seas, are the impressive necropolises of Saqqara, Abu Sir and Dahshur. Despite being overshadowed by their more famous neighbours at Giza, the Step Pyramid at Saqqara and the Red and Bent Pyramids at Dahshur are among the most stunning monuments of ancient Egypt.

Pyramids aside, the southern outskirts of Cairo are also home to the lush oasis of Al-Fayoum, which harbours ancient monuments, abundant wildlife and a spectacular desert rich in fossils. Northwest of the city, memorable day trips include the Birqash camel market, where Sudanese traders dispose of the last of their camels; and the monasteries of Wadi Natrun, which lure urban Copts to follow in the pilgrimage footsteps of their ancestors. And of course, if you're looking to take a break from sightseeing and unwind with the locals, there's nothing quite like a raucous trip on the Nile Barrages with a boatload of Cairenes kicking up their heels.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Explore the half-buried ruins of **Saqqara** (p200), home to the famous Step Pyramid of Zoser
- Penetrate the heart of the Red Pyramid, part of the ancient pyramid complex at **Dahshur** (p206)
- Immerse yourself in the sights, sounds and (most importantly) smells of the **Birqash camel market** (p212)
- Meet the astonishing monks of the desert monasteries of **Wadi Natrun** (p213)
- Take a music-filled boat ride with a boatload of holiday-making Cairenes on the **Nile Barrages** (p214)



## MEMPHIS & THE EARLY PYRAMIDS

Although most tourists associate Egypt with the Pyramids of Giza, there are approximately 90 ancient pyramids scattered around the country. The majority of these monuments are spread out along the desert between the Gaza Plateau and the oasis of Al-Fayoum, and include the must-see Step Pyramid of Zoser at Saqqara and the Red and Bent Pyramids of Dahshur. These three pyramids, which predate the complex at Giza, represent the formative steps of architecture that reached fruition in the Great Pyramid of Khufu (Cheops).

### MEMPHIS

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Around 3100 BC, the legendary pharaoh Narmer (Menes) unified the two lands of Upper and Lower Egypt, and founded Memphis, symbolically on the spot where the Nile Delta met the valley. For most of the Pharaonic period, Memphis was the capital of Egypt, though the seat of power was later moved to Thebes (now Luxor) during the era of the New Kingdom.

Originally known as *Ineb-hedj*, meaning 'White walls', the contemporary name of Memphis derives from *Men-nefer*, meaning 'Established and beautiful'. Indeed, the city was filled with palaces, gardens and temples, making it one of the greatest cities of the ancient world. In the 5th century BC, long after its period of power, Greek historian and traveller Herodotus still described Memphis as 'a prosperous city and cosmopolitan centre'. Even after Thebes became the capital during the New Kingdom, Memphis remained Egypt's second city, and prospered until it was finally abandoned during the first Muslim invasions in the 7th century AD.

Although the city was once an area replete with royal pyramids, private tombs and the necropolises of sacred animals, centuries of builders quarrying for stone, annual floods of the Nile and greed-stricken antiquity hunters succeeded where even the mighty Persians failed: Memphis has almost completely vanished. The foundations of the ancient city have long since been ploughed under, and even the enormous temple of the creator god, Ptah, is little more than a

few sparse ruins frequently waterlogged due to the high water table. Today, there are few clues as to Memphis' former grandeur and importance, and, sadly, it's difficult to imagine that any sort of settlement once stood here.

Nonetheless, a visit to Memphis is worthwhile just to stand on the hallowed grounds of one of the world's greatest cities. Furthermore, Memphis is home to a noteworthy open-air museum (Mit Rahina; adult/student ££25/15, parking ££5; 🕒 8am-4pm Oct-Apr, to 5pm May-Sep, to 3pm Ramadan) which is built around a magnificent fallen colossal limestone statue of Ramses II. Highlights of the museum include an alabaster sphinx of the New Kingdom, two statues of Ramses II that originally adorned Nubian temples, and the huge travertine beds on which the sacred Apis bulls were mummified before being placed in the Serapeum at Saqqara (p204).

### Getting There & Away

The tiny village of Memphis is 24km south of Cairo and 3km from Saqqara. While it is worth visiting as part of a tour of Saqqara and Dahshur, only those seriously into Egyptology would want to trek down here by public transport – getting to Memphis is a pain in the neck and a lengthy process.

For those determined to do it themselves, the cheapest way is to take a crowded 3rd-class train from Cairo's Ramses station to Al-Badrashein village, then walk for about half an hour, catch a Saqqara microbus and ask to be dropped off at Memphis. Unless you have plenty of time, enjoy discomfort or have overspent, we strongly recommend taking a tour or hiring the taxi for a day instead.

For more information on visiting Memphis and the pyramids at Saqqara and Dahshur by private vehicle, see boxed text, p198.

### PYRAMIDS OF ABU SIR

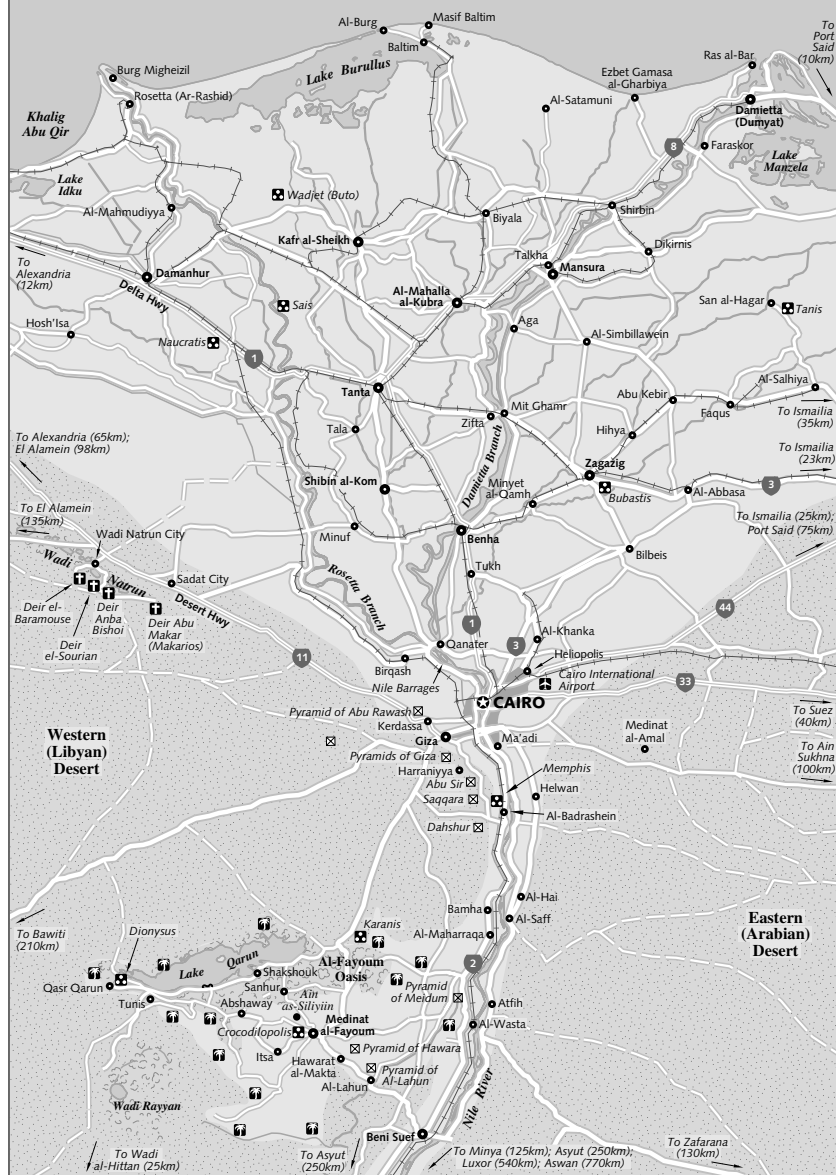
Lying between Giza and Saqqara and surrounded by sand dunes, the **pyramids of Abu Sir** (Saqqara Rd; adult/student ££20/10) form the necropolis of the 5th dynasty (2494–2345 BC). Unfortunately, most of the remains have not withstood the ravages of time as well as their bigger, older brethren at Giza, and today the pyramids are slumped and lack geometric precision.

For a long time few visitors bothered to visit Abu Sir, and although the site was officially

# AROUND CAIRO

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0 30 miles

MEDITERRANEAN SEA



AROUND CAIRO

### VISITING THE 'OTHER PYRAMIDS'

Even if you're a fiercely independent traveller, the best way to visit the 'other pyramids' – namely the Step Pyramid of Zoser and the Red and Bent Pyramids at Dahshur – is to either take part in an organised tour or hire a taxi for the day. The main reason for giving in to the comfort of a private vehicle is that these pyramids are extremely frustrating to reach via public transportation. Furthermore, a tour shouldn't cost too much money, and you can easily add Memphis and the pyramids of Abu Sir to your itinerary.

If you're looking to escape Cairo for the day, organised tours can be easily arranged through your accommodation, and it's not hard to find a cab driver willing to offer their services for the day. A private car should cost between £150 and £200 for the day (around seven hours) excluding entry fees and the obligatory baksheesh.

'opened' at the beginning of 1999 with the construction of a gatehouse, in reality most visitors are denied entry. However, if you find yourself in the area, it's worth stopping by as you're likely to be the only tourist around – even if you don't get in, the crumbling pyramids set against a desert backdrop are still photo-worthy.

### Orientation & Information

There are four pyramid complexes at Abu Sir – Sahure, Nyusera, Neferirkare and Raneferef. Although the Pyramid of Sahure is in ruins, its funerary complex is the most complete of the four.

Admission to Abu Sir is paid at either of the gatehouses off Saqqara Rd, though remember that it's not guaranteed you will be permitted to enter the site. However, if you're travelling by horse or camel from Giza to Saqqara, you will pass right alongside the pyramids without having to deal with the guards.

Note that there are no facilities at Abu Sir aside from a toilet that you may or may not be allowed to use.

### Sights

#### PYRAMID OF SAHURE

Sahure (2487–2475 BC) was the first of the 5th-dynasty pharaohs to be buried at Abu Sir, although his pyramid, originally 50m high, is now badly damaged. The entrance corridor is only half a metre high, and slopes down to a small room. From there, you can then walk through a 75m-long corridor before crawling 2m on your stomach through Pharaonic dust and spider webs to reach the burial chamber.

The better-preserved remains of Sahure's funerary temple complex stand east of the pyramid. This must have been an impressive temple, with black basalt-paved floors,

red granite date-palm columns and walls decorated with 10,000 sq metres of superbly detailed reliefs (some of these are now in the museums of Cairo and Berlin). It was connected by a 235m-long causeway to the valley temple, built at the edge of the cultivation and bordered by water. From the pyramid, on a clear day, you can see some 10 other pyramids stretching out to the horizon.

#### PYRAMID OF NYUSERA

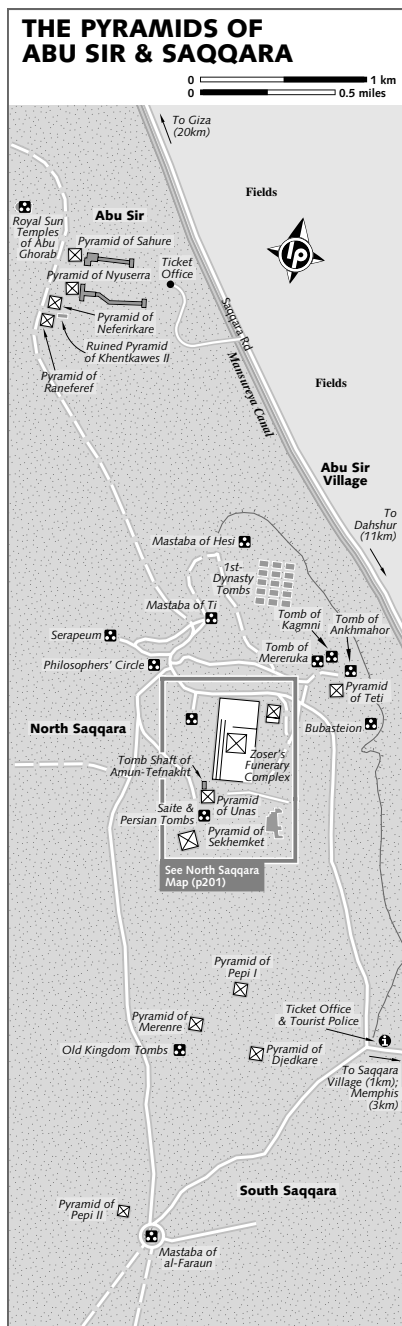
The most dilapidated of the finished pyramids at Abu Sir belonged to Nyusera (2445–2421 BC). Originally some 50m high, this pyramid has been heavily quarried over the millennia. In fact, Nyusera reused his father Neferirkare's valley temple, and then redirected the causeway to lead not to his father's pyramid, but to his own.

#### PYRAMID OF NEFERIRKARE

The Pyramid of Neferirkare (2475–2455 BC), the third pharaoh of the 5th dynasty and Sahure's brother, resembles the Step Pyramid at Saqqara. However, the present-day complex is only the core as the original outer casing has been stripped away, reducing the pyramid from its original planned height of 72m to today's 45m.

In the early 20th century in Neferirkare's funerary temple, archaeologists found the so-called Abu Sir Papyri, a highly important archive of Old Kingdom documents written in hieratic, a shorthand form of hieroglyphs. They relate to the cult of the pharaohs buried at the site, recording important details of ritual ceremonies, temple equipment, priests' work rotas and the temple accounts.

South of Neferirkare's pyramid lies the badly ruined **Pyramid of Queen Khentkawes II**, wife of Neferirkare and mother of both Raneferef



and Nyuserra. In her nearby funerary temple, Czech archaeologists discovered another set of papyrus archive documents. In addition, two virtually destroyed pyramids to the south of the queen's pyramid may have belonged to the queens of Nyuserra.

### PYRAMID OF RANEFEREF

On a diagonal, just west of Neferirkare's pyramid, are the remains of the unfinished Pyramid of Raneferef (also known as Neferefre), who reigned for seven years before Nyuserra. However, work was so little advanced at the time of his death that the tomb was only completed as a mastaba (mud-brick structure in the shape of a bench above tombs, which was the basis for later pyramids).

In the adjoining mud-brick cult building, Czech archaeologists found fragments of statuary, including a superb limestone figurine of Raneferef protected by Horus (now in the Egyptian Museum) along with papyrus fragments relating to the Abu Sir temple archives.

### ROYAL SUN TEMPLES OF ABU GHORAB

Just northwest of the Abu Sir pyramids lies the site of Abu Ghorab, which is home to two royal sun temples dedicated to the worship of Ra, the sun god of Heliopolis. The Abu Sir Papyri describe six such temples, but only two, built for Pharaohs Userkaf (2494–2487 BC) and Nyuserra, have ever been discovered.

Both of these temples follow the traditional plan of a valley temple, and contain a causeway and a large stone enclosure. This enclosure contains a large limestone obelisk standing some 37m tall on a 20m-high base. In front of the obelisk, the enormous alabaster altar can still be seen. Made in the form of a solar disc flanked by four 'hotep' signs (the hieroglyphic sign for 'offerings' and 'satisfied'), the altar itself reads 'The sun god Ra is satisfied'.

### Getting There & Away

Abu Sir is some distance off the main Saqqara road and there's no way to reach it by public transport. The best way to visit is as part of an organised tour or by private taxi. The other option is to ride a horse or camel from Giza to Saqqara and visit Abu Sir on the way.

## SAQQARA

Covering a 7km stretch of the Western Desert, Saqqara, the huge cemetery of ancient Memphis, was an active burial ground for more than 3500 years, and is Egypt's largest archaeological site. The necropolis is situated high above the Nile Valley's cultivation area, and is the final resting place for deceased pharaohs and their families, administrators, generals and sacred animals. Old Kingdom pharaohs were buried within Saqqara's 11 major pyramids, while their subjects were buried in the hundreds of smaller tombs found in the great necropolis. Not surprisingly, the name Saqqara is most likely derived from *Sokar*, the Memphite god of the dead.

Most of Saqqara, except for the Step Pyramid, was buried in sand until the mid-19th century, when the great French Egyptologist Auguste Mariette uncovered the Serapeum. Since then, it has been a gradual process of rediscovery: the Step Pyramid's massive funerary complex was not discovered until 1924 and it is still being restored. French architect Jean-Philippe Lauer, who began work here in 1926, was involved in its restoration for an incredible 75 years

until his death in 2001. In 2006 and 2007, a string of new discoveries captured international media attention; these included the mummified remains of three royal dentists, a doctor and a Pharaonic butler (for more information, see boxed text, p206).

Today, although Saqqara is one of the most popular attractions in the Cairo area, independent visitors are few and far between, and the organised tour groups quickly rush in and out during the morning hours. As a result, here on the edge of the desert, you'll find a peaceful quality rarely found at other ancient sites in Egypt.

### Orientation & Information

The main monuments are in an area around the Step Pyramid known as **North Saqqara** (adult/student ££50/25, parking ££2; ☎ 8am-4pm Oct-Apr, to 5pm May-Sep, to 3pm Ramadan). About 1km south of the Step Pyramid is a group of monuments known as South Saqqara, with no official entry fee or opening hours as these are rarely visited.

At North Saqqara, facilities include toilets, drink stands and souvenir stalls, but you shouldn't expect anything but monuments

### LOOKING GOOD FOR ETERNITY *Dr Joann Fletcher*

When visiting temples and tombs, the endless scenes of pharaohs – standing sideways, presenting a never-ending line of gods with the same old offerings – can start to get a bit much. Look closer, however, and these scenes can reveal a few surprises.

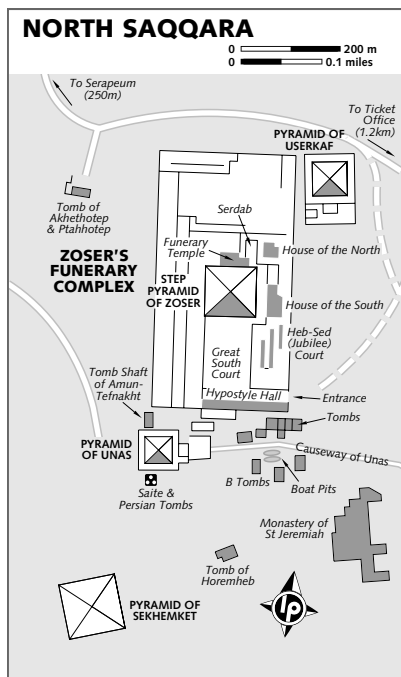
As the little figures on the wall strike their eternal poses, a keen eye can find anything from pharaohs ploughing fields to small girls pulling at each other's hair. A whole range of activities that we consider modern can be found among the most ancient scenes, including hairdressing, perfumery, manicures and even massage – the treasury overseer Ptahhotep (p203) certainly enjoyed his comforts, and is seen inhaling deeply from a jar of perfume, while his feet are massaged and fingers manicured. There are similar scenes elsewhere at Saqqara, with a group of men in the Tomb of Ankhmahor (p205) enjoying both manicures and pedicures.

With the title 'overseer of royal hairdressers and wigmakers' commonly held by the highest officials in the land, hairdressing scenes can also be found in the most unexpected places. Not only does Ptahhotep have his wig fitted by his manservants, similar hairdressing scenes can even be found on coffins, as on the limestone sarcophagus of 11th-dynasty Queen Kawit (in Cairo's Egyptian Museum, p185), which shows her wig being deftly styled.

Among its wealth of scenes, the Theban Tomb of Rekhmire (p270) shows a banquet at which the female harpist sings, 'Put perfume on the hair of the goddess Maat'. And in the Deir al-Medina tomb of the workman Pshedu (p273), his family tree contains relatives whose hair denotes their seniority, the eldest shown with the whitest hair as opposed to with wrinkles.

As in many representations of ancient Egyptians, black eye make-up is worn by both male and female, adult and child. As well as its aesthetic value, it was also used as a means of reducing the glare of the sun – think ancient sunglasses. Even manual workers wore it: the Deir al-Medina Tomb of Ipy (p273) once contained a scene in which men building the royal tombs were having eye paint applied while they worked. Difficult to imagine on a building site today!





and sand at South Saqqara. Before exploring either complex, check at the ticket office to see which monuments are open – this constantly changes.

## Sights

### ZOSER'S FUNERARY COMPLEX

#### Step Pyramid

In the year 2650 BC, Imhotep, the pharaoh's chief architect (later deified) built the Step Pyramid (Map p201) for Zoser. It is Egypt's (and the world's) earliest stone monument, and its significance cannot be overstated. Previously, temples were made of perishable materials, while royal tombs were usually underground rooms topped with mud-brick mastabas. However, Imhotep developed the mastaba into a pyramid *and* built it in hewn stone. From this flowed Egypt's later architectural achievements.

The pyramid was transformed from mastaba into pyramid through six separate stages of construction and alteration. With each stage, the builders gained confidence in their use of the new medium and mastered the techniques required to move, place and secure the huge

blocks. This first pyramid rose in six steps to a height of 60m, and was encased in fine white limestone.

The Step Pyramid is surrounded by a vast funerary complex, enclosed by a 1645m-long panelled limestone wall, and covers 15 hectares. Part of the enclosure wall survives today at a height of about 5m, and a section near the entrance was restored to its original 10m height. Fourteen false doors, formerly of wood but now carved from stone and painted to resemble real wood, hinges and sockets, allowed the pharaoh's ka, or attendant spirit, to come and go at will.

The complex is entered at the southeastern corner via a vestibule and along a colonnaded corridor into the broad hypostyle hall. The 40 pillars in the corridor are the original 'bundle columns', ribbed to resemble a bundle of palm or papyrus stems. The walls have been restored, but the protective ceiling is modern concrete. The roof of the hypostyle hall is supported by four impressive columns and there's a large, false, half-open ka door.

#### Great South Court

The hypostyle hall leads into the Great South Court (Map p201), a huge open area flanking the south side of the pyramid, with a section of wall featuring a frieze of cobras. The cobra, or uraeus, represented the goddess Wadjet, a fire-spitting agent of destruction and protector of the pharaoh. It was a symbol of Egyptian royalty, and a rearing cobra always appeared on the brow of a pharaoh's headdress or crown.

Near the base of the pyramid is an altar, and in the centre of the court are two stone B-shaped boundary markers, which delineated the ritual race the pharaoh had to run, a literal demonstration of his fitness to rule. The race was part of the Jubilee Festival, or Heb-Sed, which usually occurred after 30 years' reign, and involved the pharaoh's symbolic rejuvenation and the recognition of his supremacy by officials from all over Egypt. The construction of the Heb-Sed featured within Zoser's funerary complex was therefore intended to perpetuate his revitalisation for eternity.

The buildings on the eastern side of the pyramid are also connected with the royal jubilee, and include the **Heb-Sed (Jubilee) Court**. Buildings on the east side of the court represent the shrines of Lower Egypt, and those on the west represent Upper Egypt. All were designed to house the spirits of Egypt's gods

### SAQQARA HALF-DAY ITINERARY

Enter through the hypostyle hall and gaze on the **Step Pyramid**, the world's oldest pyramid. Run the rejuvenation race in Zoser's **Heb-Sed Court**, wonder at the ancient graffiti in the **Houses of the North and South** and stare into Zoser's stone eyes in the eerie **Serdab** (cellar). Walk anticlockwise around the Step Pyramid, visit the mastaba tomb of 5th-dynasty father and son **Akhethotep** and **Ptahhotep**, with its beautiful painted reliefs of animals, battle scenes and the two men receiving offerings, then head south towards the causeway of Unas.

Moving away from the Step Pyramid, descend 25m into the **Pyramid of Teti** to see the famous Pyramid Texts inside, and then pop into the nearby tombs of **Mereruka** and **Ankhmahor**. To complete your visit, move on to the most wonderful tomb of all, the **Mastaba of Ti**, with its fascinating tomb reliefs of daily life in the Old Kingdom, which show people trading, building ships, milking cows and rescuing their livestock from crocodiles. Of course, if you want to extend your stay and get off the beaten path, the rarely visited monuments at **South Saqqara** are just 1km away across the sands.

when they gathered to witness the rebirth of the pharaoh during his jubilee rituals.

North of the Heb-Sed Court are the **House of the South** and **House of the North**, representing the two main shrines of Upper and Lower Egypt, and symbolising the unity of the country. The heraldic plants of the two regions were chosen to decorate the column capitals: papyrus in the north and lotus in the south.

The House of the South also features one of the earliest examples of tourist graffiti. In the 47th year of Ramses II's reign, nearly 1500 years after Zoser's death, Hadnakhte, a treasury scribe, recorded his admiration for Zoser while 'on a pleasure trip west of Memphis' in about 1232 BC. His hieratic script, written in black ink, is preserved behind Perspex just inside the building's entrance.

#### Serdab

A stone structure right in front of the pyramid, the serdab (a small room containing a statue of the deceased to which offerings were presented; Map p201) contains a slightly tilted wooden box with two holes drilled into its north face. Look through these and you'll have the eerie experience of coming face to face with Zoser himself. Inside is a near-life-size, lifelike painted statue of the long-dead pharaoh, gazing stonily out towards the stars. However, it's worth noting that this statue is only a copy – the original is in Cairo's Egyptian Museum.

The original entrance to the Step Pyramid is directly behind the serdab, and leads down to a maze of subterranean tunnels and chambers quarried for almost 6km through the rock. The pharaoh's burial chamber is vaulted in

granite, and others are decorated with reliefs of the jubilee race and feature some exquisite blue faïence tile decoration. Although the interior of the pyramid is unsafe and closed to the public, part of the blue-tiled decoration can be seen in the Egyptian Museum.

#### PYRAMID OF USERKAF

Northeast of the funerary complex is the Pyramid of Userkaf (Map p201), the first pharaoh of the 5th dynasty, which is closed to the public for safety reasons. Although the removal of its limestone casing has left little more than a mound of rubble, it once rose to a height of 49m. Furthermore, its funerary temple was once decorated with the most exquisite naturalistic relief carvings, judging from one of the few remaining fragments (now in the Egyptian Museum) showing birds by the river.

#### PYRAMID & CAUSEWAY OF UNAS

What appears to be another big mound of rubble, this time to the southwest of Zoser's funerary complex, is actually the 2375–2345 BC Pyramid of Unas (Map p201), the last pharaoh of the 5th dynasty. Built only 300 years after the inspired creation of the Step Pyramid, this unassuming pile of loose blocks and debris once stood 43m high.

From the outside, the Pyramid of Unas is not much to look at, though the interior marked the beginning of a significant development in funerary practices. For the first time, the royal burial chamber was decorated, its ceiling adorned with stars and its white alabaster-lined walls inscribed with beautiful blue hieroglyphs.



The aforementioned hieroglyphs are the funerary inscriptions now known as the Pyramid Texts, comprising 283 separate ‘spells’ chosen by Unas to protect his soul. The inscriptions include rituals, prayers and hymns, as well as lists of items, such as the food and clothing Unas would require in the afterlife. Unfortunately, deterioration of the interior led to the pyramid’s permanent closure in 1998.

The 750m-long causeway running from the east side of Unas’ pyramid to his valley temple (now marked by little more than a couple of stone columns at the side of the road leading up to the site) was originally roofed and decorated with a great range of painted relief scenes, including a startling image of people starving (now preserved in the Louvre in Paris).

The two 45m-long boat pits of Unas lie immediately south of the causeway, while on either side of the causeway are numerous tombs – more than 200 have been excavated. Of the several better-preserved examples usually open to visitors are the tombs of one of Unas’ queens, Nebet, and that of Princess Idut, who was possibly his daughter. There are also several brightly painted tombs of prominent 5th- and 6th-dynasty officials. These include the Tomb of Mehu, the royal vizier (minister), and the Tomb of Nefer, the supervisor of singers.

### **B Tombs**

Several beautiful tombs (Map p201) have been cleared in the area east of the Pyramid of Unas. Although not quite as famous as the tombs north of the Step Pyramid, this set includes a number of interesting Pharaonic attendants. These include the joint Tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, overseers of the royal manicurists to Pharaoh Nyuserra; the Tomb of Neferherentpah, the overseer of the royal hairdressers; and the Tomb of Irukaptah, overseer of the royal butchers.

### **Saite & Persian Tombs**

Around the sides of the Pyramid of Unas are several large shaft tombs (Map p201) of the Saite (664–525 BC) and Persian (525–404 BC) eras. These are some of the deepest tombs in Egypt, although as with just about everywhere else in the country, the precaution against grave robbers failed. However, the sheer size of the tombs and the great

stone sarcophagi within, combined with their sophisticated decoration, demonstrate that the technical achievements of the later part of Egyptian history were equal to those of earlier times.

To the north of the pyramid is the enormous tomb shaft of the Saite general Amun-Tefnakht. On the south side of the pyramid is a group of three Persian tombs – the entrance is covered by a small wooden hut to which a guard in the area has the key. If you don’t have your own torch, he’ll lead you down a 25m-deep winding staircase to the vaulted tombs of three officials: the admiral Djenhebu to the west, chief royal physician Psamtik in the centre and Psamtik’s son, Pediese, to the east.

### **MONASTERY OF ST JEREMIAH**

Uphill from the causeway of Unas, south-east of the boat pits, are the half-buried remains of this Coptic monastery (Map p201), which dates from the 5th century AD. Unfortunately, little is left of the structure, which was ransacked by invading Arabs in 950. More recently, the wall paintings and carvings were removed to the Coptic Museum in Cairo (p123).

### **PYRAMID OF SEKHEMKET**

Closed to the public because of its dangerous condition, the unfinished pyramid (Map p201) of Zoser’s successor Sekhemket (2648–2640 BC) is a short distance west of the ruined monastery. The project was abandoned for unknown reasons when the great limestone enclosure wall was only 3m high, despite the fact that the architects had already constructed the underground chambers in the rock beneath the pyramid as well as the deep shaft of the south tomb. An unused travertine sarcophagus was found in the sealed burial chamber, and a quantity of gold, jewellery and a child’s body were discovered in the south tomb. Recent surveys have also revealed another mysterious large complex to the west of Sekhemket’s enclosure, but this remains unexcavated.

### **TOMB OF AKHETHOTEP & PTAHHOTEP**

Akhethotep and his son Ptahhotep were senior royal officials during the reigns of Djedkare (2414–2375 BC) and Unas at the end of the 5th dynasty. Akhethotep served as vizier, judge, supervisor of pyramid titles and supervisor of priests, though his titles were eventually inherited by Ptahhotep, along

with his tomb (Map p201). The joint mastaba has two burial chambers, two chapels and a pillared hall.

The painted reliefs in Ptahhotep's section are particularly beautiful, and portray a wide range of animals, from lions and hedgehogs to the domesticated cattle and fowl that were brought as offerings to the deceased. Ptahhotep himself is portrayed resplendent in a panther-skin robe inhaling perfume from a jar. Ever the fan of pampering himself, he is having his wig fitted, his feet massaged and his fingers manicured (some Egyptologists prefer to interpret this detail as Ptahhotep inspecting an important document, which would be in keeping with his official status).

### PHILOSOPHERS' CIRCLE

Nearby is this sad-looking group of Greek statues (Map p199), which are arranged in a semicircle and sheltered by a spectacularly ugly concrete shelter. This is the remnant of a collection of philosophers and poets set up as a wayside shrine by Ptolemy I (305–285 BC) as part of his patronage of learning. From left to right are Plato, Heraclitus, Thales, Protagoras, Homer, Hesiod, Demetrius of Phalerum and Pindar.

### SERAPEUM

The Serapeum (Map p199), which is dedicated to the sacred Apis bull, is one of the highlights of visiting Saqqara. The Apis bulls were by far the most important of the cult animals entombed at Saqqara. The Apis, it was believed, was an incarnation of Ptah, the god of Memphis, and was the calf of a cow struck by lightning from heaven. Once divinely impregnated, the cow could never again give birth, and her calf was kept in the Temple of Ptah at Memphis and worshipped as a god.

The Apis was always portrayed as black, with a distinctive white diamond on its forehead, the image of a vulture on its back and a scarab-shaped mark on its tongue. When it died, the bull was mummified on one of the large travertine embalming tables discovered at Memphis, then carried in a stately procession to the subterranean galleries of the Serapeum at Saqqara, and placed in a huge stone sarcophagus.

The first Apis burial took place in the reign of Amenhotep III (1390–1352 BC), and the practice continued until 30 BC. The enormous

granite and limestone coffins could weigh up to 80 tonnes each. Until the mid-19th century, the existence of the sacred Apis tombs was known only from classical references. But, having found a half-buried sphinx at Saqqara, and using the description given by the Greek historian Strabo in 24 BC, in 1851 Auguste Mariette uncovered the avenue leading to the Serapeum. However, only one Apis sarcophagus was found intact.

### MASTABA OF TI

Northeast of the Philosophers' Circle is the Mastaba of Ti (Map p199), which was discovered by Mariette in 1865. It is perhaps the grandest and most detailed private tomb at Saqqara, and one of our main sources of knowledge about life in Old Kingdom Egypt. Its owner, Ti, was overseer of the Abu Sir pyramids and sun temples (among other things) during the 5th dynasty. In fact, the superb quality of his tomb is in keeping with his nickname, Ti the Rich.

Like Zoser, a life-size statue of the deceased stands in the tomb's offering hall (as with the Zoser statue, the original is in the Egyptian Museum). Ti's wife, Neferhetpes, was priestess and 'royal acquaintance'. Together with their two sons, Demedj (overseer of the duck pond) and Ti (inspector of royal manicurists), the couple appear throughout the tomb alongside detailed scenes of daily life. As men and women are seen working on the land, preparing food, fishing, building boats, dancing, trading and avoiding crocodiles, their images are accompanied by chattering hieroglyphic dialogue, all no doubt familiar to Ti during his career as a royal overseer: 'Hurry up, the herdsman's coming', 'Don't make so much noise!', 'Pay up – it's cheap!'.

### PYRAMID OF TETI

The avenue of sphinxes excavated by Mariette in the 1850s has again been hidden by desert sands, but it once extended to the much earlier Pyramid of Teti (Map p199). Teti (2345–2323 BC) was the first pharaoh of the 6th dynasty, and his pyramid was built in step form and cased in limestone. Unfortunately, the pyramid was robbed for its treasure and its stone, and today only a modest mound remains. However, the interior fared better, and is similar in appearance to that of the Pyramid of Unas (p202). Within the intact burial chamber, Teti's basalt sarcophagus

is well preserved, and represents the first example of a sarcophagus with inscriptions on it.

#### **TOMBS OF MERERUKA & ANKHMAHOR**

Near the Pyramid of Teti is the tomb (Map p199) of his highest official, Mereruka, vizier and overseer of priests. It's the largest Old Kingdom courtier's tomb, with 32 chambers covering an area of 1000 sq metres. The 17 chambers on the eastern side belong to Mereruka, and include a magnificent six-columned offering hall featuring a life-size statue of Mereruka appearing to walk right out of the wall to receive the offerings brought to him.

Other rooms are reserved for Mereruka's wife, Princess Seshseshat (Teti's daughter), and their eldest son, Merititi (whose name means 'Beloved of Teti'). Much of the tomb's decoration is similar to that of the Mastaba of Ti, with an even greater number of animals portrayed – look out for the wide-mouthed, sharp-tusked hippos as you enter – along with a charming scene of domestic bliss as husband and wife are seated joyfully on a bed as Seshseshat plays them music on her harp.

Further east, the tomb (Map p199) of the 6th-dynasty vizier and palace overseer, Ankhmahor, contains more interesting scenes of daily life. Most unusual here are images of surgical procedures, earning the tomb its alternative title, the Doctor's Tomb. As two boys are circumscribed the hieroglyphic caption says, 'Hold him firmly so he does not fall!'

#### **TOMB OF HOREMHEB**

Originally designated as the final resting place of General Horemheb, this tomb (Map p201) became irrelevant in 1348 BC when its intended occupant seized power from Pharaoh Ay. Soon afterwards, Pharaoh Horemheb commissioned the building of a new tomb in the Valley of the Kings. Although the tomb at Saqqara was never put to use, it did yield a number of exquisite reliefs that are currently displayed around the world.

#### **MASTABA OF AL-FARAON**

Known as the Pharaoh's Bench, this unusual funerary complex (Map p199) belongs to the last 4th-dynasty pharaoh, the short-lived Shepseskaf (2503–2498 BC). Shepseskaf was the son of Menkaure, builder of Giza's third

great pyramid, though he failed to emulate the glory of his father. Occupying an enclosure once covering 700 sq metres, Shepseskaf's rectangular tomb was built of limestone blocks, and originally covered by a further layer of fine, white limestone and a lower layer of red granite. Inside the tomb, a 21m-long corridor slopes down to storage rooms and a vaulted burial chamber.

#### **PYRAMID OF PEPI II**

This 2278–2184 BC pyramid (Map p199) once interred the remains of Pepi II, whose 94-year reign at the end of the 6th dynasty may have been the longest in Egyptian history. Despite his longevity, Pepi II's 52m-high pyramid was of the same modest proportions as those of his predecessor, Pepi I. Although the exterior is little more than a mound of rubble, the interior is decorated with more passages from the Pyramid Texts.

#### **OTHER PYRAMIDS**

South Saqqara is also home to the pyramids of **Djedkare**, **Merenre** and **Pepi I** (Map p199). Known as the 'Pyramid of the Sentinel', the 25m-high Djedkare pyramid contains the remains of the last ruler of the 5th dynasty, and can be penetrated from the north side. The pyramids of Merenre and Pepi I are little more than slowly collapsing piles of rock, though the latter is significant as 'Memphis' appears in one of its names.

#### **Getting There & Away**

Saqqara is about 25km south of Cairo and is best visited in a taxi, combined with a visit to Memphis and Dahshur – see boxed text (p198), for more details.

Alternatively, competent riders can hire a horse or camel for the day in Giza, and make the three-hour ride to Saqqara – see p147 for more details.

If you're coming from Cairo or Giza, and are determined to do it on your own, you have several options, including the time-consuming and hassle-rich combination of train, bus and foot via Al-Badrashein. One of the cheapest options is to take a bus or minibus to the Saqqara Rd and get off at the Saqqara road stop. From there, take a microbus to the turn-off to the Saqqara site (Haram Saqqara; don't ask for Saqqara village as you'll end up in the wrong place). You'll then have to walk 1.5km to the ticket office.

### ARCHAEOLOGY IN ACTION

If you thought major Egyptological discoveries were a thing of the past, think again. Saqqara, perhaps more than any other site in Egypt, has been snapping up headlines in recent years following a slew of astonishing findings.

In early 2005, Egyptian archaeologists unearthed a 2300-year-old unidentified mummy buried in sand at the bottom of a 6m shaft. The perfectly preserved mummy was wearing a golden mask, and was encased in a wooden sarcophagus covered in brightly coloured images of gods and goddesses. Describing the find, Dr Zahi Hawass, secretary-general of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, said: 'We have revealed what may be the most beautiful mummy ever found in Egypt.'

In late 2006, the graves of three royal dentists were discovered after the arrest of tomb raiders led archaeologists to the site. Just two months later, the mummified remains of a doctor were found alongside surgical tools dating back more than 4000 years.

In early 2007, archaeologists unveiled the tombs of a Pharaonic butler and a scribe that had been buried for more than 3000 years. The scribe's mud-brick tomb contained several wooden statues and a door with intricate hieroglyphics, while the butler's limestone grave contained two painted coffins. Of particular interest were the blue and orange painted murals that adorned the butler's tomb, and depicted scenes of people performing rituals and monkeys eating fruit.

Although archaeologists have been excavating Saqqara for more than a century, it's estimated that only one-third of the burial site has been uncovered. According to Dr Hawass, 'The sands of Saqqara reveal lots of secrets'.

### Getting Around

It's easy to walk around North Saqqara, though it can be a hot and sweaty slog through the sand to South Saqqara. It's also possible to hire a camel, horse or donkey from near the Serapeum to take you on a circuit of the sites for between E£25 and E£50. You'll need to pay more the further into the desert away from North Saqqara you go.

### DAHSHUR

About 10km south of Saqqara in a quiet bit of desert is **Dahshur** (adult/student E£25/15; ☎ 8am-4pm Oct-Apr, to 5pm May-Sep, to 3pm Ramadan), an impressive 3.5km-long field of 4th- and 12th-dynasty pyramids. Although there were originally 11 pyramids at Dahshur, only the two Old Kingdom ones, the incredibly striking Bent and Red Pyramids, remain intact, as well as three Middle Kingdom pyramid complexes.

Pharaoh Sneferu (2613-2589 BC), father of Khufu and founder of the 4th dynasty, built Egypt's first true pyramid here, the Red Pyramid, as well as an earlier version, the Bent Pyramid. These two pyramids are the same height, and together are also the third-largest pyramids in Egypt after the two largest at Giza. Before founding the necropolis at Dahshur, Sneferu also began the Pyramid of Meidum (p210).

Although the entire plain was previously an off-limits military zone, part of the complex was opened to tourism in 1996. Today, many clued travellers are adding Dahshur to their itinerary for three reasons: the pyramids here are just as impressive as their counterparts at Giza, the site is much more peaceful (no camel touts in sight) and the entry fee is significantly cheaper.

### Orientation & Information

Admission is paid at a small gatehouse on the edge of the complex. The Bent Pyramid, and its surrounds, is still a militarised zone, meaning that it can only be admired at a distance. Fortunately, the wonderful Red Pyramid is open to visitors, and penetrating its somewhat dank interior is a true Indiana Jones-esque experience.

Note that there are no facilities at Dahshur aside from a toilet that you may or may not be allowed to use.

### Sights

#### BENT PYRAMID

Experimenting with ways to create a true, smooth-sided pyramid, Sneferu's architects began with the same steep angle and inward-leaning courses of stone they used to create step pyramids. When this began to show signs of stress and instability around halfway up its

eventual 105m height, they had little choice but to reduce the angle from 54° to 43° and begin to lay the stones in horizontal layers. This explains why the structure has the unusual shape that gives it its name. Most of its outer casing is still intact, and inside (closed to visitors) are two burial chambers, the highest of which retains its original ancient scaffolding of great cedar beams to counteract internal instability. There is also a small subsidiary pyramid to the south as well as the remains of a small funerary temple to the east. About halfway towards the cultivation to the east are the ruins of Sneferu's valley temple, which yielded some interesting reliefs.

### RED PYRAMID

The world's oldest true pyramid is the North Pyramid, which is better known as the Red Pyramid. It derives its name either from the red tones of its weathered limestone, after the better-quality white limestone casing was removed, or perhaps from the red graffiti and construction marks scribbled on its masonry in ancient times. Having learnt from their experiences building the Bent Pyramid, the same architects carried on where they had left off, building the Red Pyramid at the same 43° angle as the Bent Pyramid's more gently inclining upper section. The entrance – via 125 extremely steep stone steps and a 63m-long passage – takes you down to two antechambers with stunning 12m-high corbelled ceilings and a 15m-high corbelled burial chamber in which fragmentary human remains, possibly of Sneferu himself, were found.

### BLACK PYRAMID

Of the three Middle Kingdom pyramid complexes built by Amenemhat II (1922–1878 BC), Sesostri III (1874–1855 BC) and

his son Amenemhat III (1855–1808 BC), only the oddly shaped Black Pyramid of Amenemhat III is worth a look.

The towerlike structure appears to have completely collapsed due to the pilfering of its limestone outer casing in medieval times, but the mud-brick remains contain a maze of corridors and rooms designed to deceive tomb robbers. Thieves did manage to penetrate the burial chambers, but left behind a number of precious funerary artefacts that were discovered in 1993.

### Getting There & Away

The only way to visit Dahshur is by taxi or organised tour, which can easily be combined with a visit to Memphis, Abu Sir and Saqqara – see boxed text (p210), for more details.

## AL-FAYOUM OASIS

This large semi-oasis, about 70km wide and 60km long, is an extremely fertile basin watered by the Nile via hundreds of capillary canals and is home to more than two million people. The region also harbours a number of important archaeological sites, particularly Qasr Qarun and the Pyramid of Meidum, as well as scenic Lake Qarun and Wadi Rayyan. Unfortunately, tight security restrictions have essentially crushed tourism in the region, which means that independent travel in Al-Fayoum can be frustratingly slow and at times prohibited.

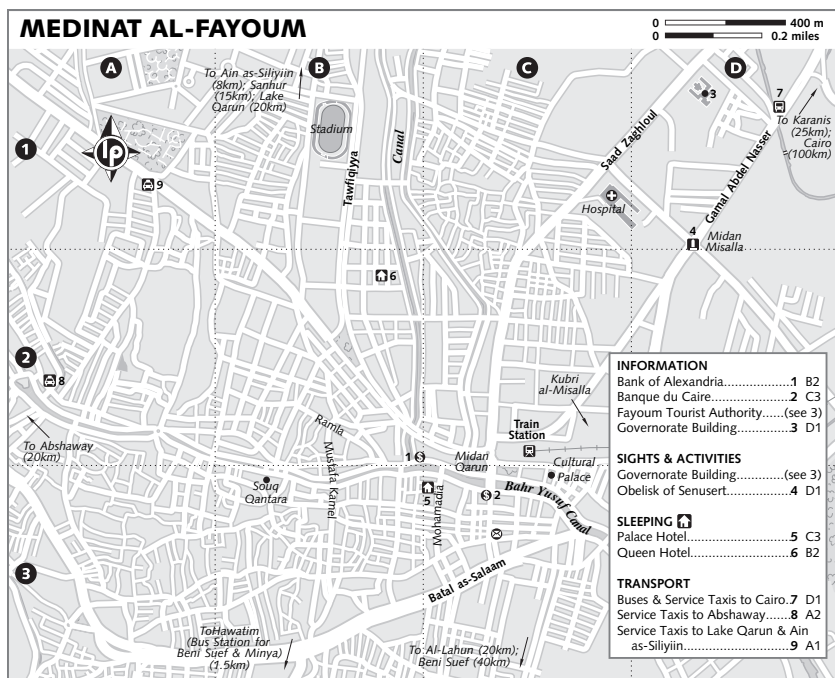
### MEDINAT AL-FAYOUM

☎ 084 / pop 513,000

The largest town on the Al-Fayoum oasis was a favourite holiday spot for 13th-dynasty

### SECURITY IN AL-FAYOUM

This relatively quiet corner of Egypt has the most heavy-handed security restrictions in the whole of the country, a result of the clampdown that occurred after the massacre of tourists in Cairo and Luxor in 1997. Many of the Islamist terrorists involved in the Luxor massacre came from Al-Fayoum, and Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Gama'a al-Islamiyya have a strong local following (check out how many of the local men have a callus on their foreheads, indicating that they are particularly devout and spend a lot of time with their heads bowed in prayer). This poses a real problem for foreigners, who will often find they are not allowed to leave their hotel rooms without a dedicated tourist-police escort or use local transport. If you intend to explore the Al-Fayoum area, be advised that you will have to deal with more hassles than usual, though it's worth suffering a little extra abuse for the chance to explore this little-visited oasis.



pharaohs, who built a series of pleasure palaces in the area. Centuries later, the Greeks, who believed the crocodiles in Lake Qarun were sacred, called the area Crocodilopolis, and built a temple in honour of Sobek, the crocodile-headed god. During Ptolemaic and Roman times, pilgrims came from across the ancient world to feed the sacred beasts.

These days, however, Medinat al-Fayoum (Town of the Fayoum) is a less than appealing mix of crumbling concrete, horn-happy drivers, choking fumes, swirling dust and crowded streets. Needless to say, there is little reason to spend any more time here than is absolutely necessary, though it's a convenient enough base for visiting the major sights in the region.

### Orientation & Information

The Bahr Yusuf canal acts as the city's main artery, and most commercial activities take place along it. Banks in the town include Bank of Alexandria and Banque du Caire.

Located at the Governorate Building, the **Fayoum Tourism Authority** (☎ 634 2313, 010 543 4726; F\_tourism73@hotmail.com; Sharia Saad Zaghloul)

can organise guides to take travellers around the oasis's sites. From Al-Fayoum, you'll be looking at a cost of around E£300 for a guide and taxi for the day, which should allow you to visit the Pyramid of Meidum, Lake Qarun and Wadi Rayyan.

For more information on the oasis, obtain a copy of *The Fayoum: History and Guide* by R Neil Hewison (American University in Cairo Press).

The bus and taxi stations are a short hike from the city centre.

### Sights

As far as sights go, there's the **Obelisk of Senusert**, which you'll pass coming in from Cairo at the centre of a roundabout to the northeast of town. Although it looks lost among the cars and buses, it's supposedly the only obelisk in Egypt with a rounded top, and it also features a cleft in which a golden statue of Ra was placed, reflecting the sun's rays in the four directions of the wind.

The **Governorate Building** (Sharia Saad Zaghloul) houses a modest display on the history and fauna of the oasis.



## PORTRAITS OF THE PAST

Al-Fayoum may not be famous for much these days, but it was here that caches of what are some of the world's earliest portraits were found. These extraordinarily lifelike representations, known as the 'Fayoum Portraits', were painted on wooden panels and put over the faces of the mummies, or painted directly onto linen shrouds covering the corpses. This fusion of ancient Egyptian and Graeco-Roman funerary practices laid the foundation for the Western tradition of realistic portraiture.

Dating from between 30 BC and AD 395, the paintings were executed in a technique involving a heated mixture of pigment and wax. Remarkable for the skill of the anonymous artists who painted them, the realistic and eerily modern-looking faces bridge the centuries. The haunting images are made all the more poignant by their youth (some are only babies) – a reflection of the high mortality rates at the time.

More than 1000 of these portraits have been found, not just in Al-Fayoum but also throughout Egypt. They now reside in numerous museums around the world, including the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (see p193).

## Sleeping & Eating

**Palace Hotel** (☎ 631 1222; Bahr Yusuf, s/d ££30/50, s/d with bathroom, ££40/60, s/d with bathroom & air-con ££60/75; 🍷) It's cheap but with a certain air of respectability, and though this ageing relic has seen better dynasties, it'll do in a pinch. The rooms themselves are clean if slightly musty, and you'll get a decent night's sleep if you're not too fussy. The Palace is 200m west of the park; to find it, look up from street level – it's the pink building with a sign on the 2nd floor, and is entered via a tiled open-air arcade behind a watch kiosk.

**Queen Hotel** (☎ 634 6819; Sharia Minshaat Lutfallah; s/d ££160/200; 🍷) The Queen is undoubtedly the most comfortable option in town, which is one reason it can be difficult to get a room here. Relatively clean and spacious rooms have private bathrooms, minifridges and satellite TV, and serve as a nice base if you want to spend a day or two exploring the oasis. Even if you're not staying here, the on-site restaurant serves decent food, though don't expect a cold beer in these parts.

There are several very basic cafés and assorted eateries on the canal-side road just west of the park.

## Getting There & Away

Buses to Cairo (££6 to ££8, two to three hours) leave every half-hour from 7am until 7pm from the station on the west side of Gamal Abdel Nasser Rd (the Cairo road). These buses take you to the Ahmed Helmy bus station behind Cairo's Ramses train station, stopping en route at Al-Monieb station on Midan Giza.

From a separate station in an area called Hawatim, about 1.5km from the tourist office in the centre and to the southwest of Medinat al-Fayoum, buses leave regularly for Beni Suef (££3 to ££5, one to two hours) and twice daily for Minya (££8 to ££10, two to three hours).

Crowded trains of questionable safety leave Medinat al-Fayoum en route to Cairo every day at 5pm (3rd class ££4) – you're much better off getting a bus.

Service taxis leave from the bus stations. To Cairo or Giza, they cost ££5 to ££10. You can also take a service taxi to Midan Ramses for about ££10 or Beni Suef for ££5.

## Getting Around

Green-and-white minibuses (25pt) cover all areas of Medinat al-Fayoum between the western and eastern bus stations.

## KARANIS

At the edge of the oasis depression, 25km north of Medinat al-Fayoum on the road to Cairo, lie the ruins of ancient Karanis. Founded by Ptolemy II's mercenaries in the 3rd century BC, the town was once a mud-brick settlement with a population in the thousands.

Today, little of the ancient city remains intact aside from a few walls, though Karanis is home to two well-preserved **Graeco-Roman temples** (adult/student ££20/10; 🕒 8am–4pm) in the southern part of town. The larger and more interesting temple was built in the 1st century BC, and is dedicated to two local crocodile gods, Pnepheros and Petesouchos. The temple is also adorned with inscriptions dating

from the reigns of the Roman emperors Nero, Claudius and Vespasian.

The nearby **Museum of Kom Aushim** (Mathaf Kom Aushim; ☎ 650 1825; Cairo rd; adult/student E£16/8; ⌚ 8am-4pm) has good displays of Old and Middle Kingdom objects, including sacred wooden boats, Canopic jars, and wooden and ceramic statuettes entombed to serve the deceased in the afterlife. Items from the Graeco-Roman period, which give context to Karanis, are exhibited on the 1st floor.

To get here, catch one of the Cairo-bound buses from Medinat al-Fayoum (E£5).

## PYRAMID OF MEIDUM

About 32km to the northeast of Medinat al-Fayoum is the ruin of the first true pyramid attempted by the ancient Egyptians, namely the **Pyramid of Meidum** (adult/student E£25/15; ⌚ 8am-4pm). Beginning as an eight-stepped structure, the steps were later filled in and the outer casing was added, forming the first true pyramid shell. However, there were serious design flaws, and sometime after completion (possibly as late as the last few centuries BC), the pyramid's own weight caused the sides to collapse. Today, only the core of the 'Collapsed' Pyramid of Meidum stands, though it is still an impressive sight to behold.

Pharaoh Huni (2637–2613 BC) was responsible for commissioning the pyramid, although it was his son Sneferu who was responsible for the actual building. Interestingly enough, it is likely that Sneferu's architects learnt from their mistakes since they then went on to build the more successful Bent and Red Pyramids at Dahshur (p206).

The guard at the nearby house will unlock the entrance of the pyramid, from where steps lead 75m down to the empty burial chamber. Near the pyramid are the large mastaba tombs of some of Sneferu's family and officials, including his son Rahotep and wife Nofret. Note that there are no facilities at Meidum.

To reach the pyramid, take any service taxi or bus running between Cairo and Beni Suef, and ask to be dropped off at the Meidum turn-off. From here, you will still have about 6km to go, but it can be difficult to get a lift. Alternatively, consider hiring a taxi from either Cairo or Medinat al-Fayoum to ensure that you have reliable round-trip transportation.

## PYRAMID OF HAWARA

About 8km to the southeast of Medinat al-Fayoum, off the Beni Suef road, stands the dilapidated mud-brick **Pyramid of Hawara** (adult/student E£20/10; ⌚ 8am-4pm). This is the second pyramid of Amenemhat III, his other being the towerlike Black Pyramid at Dahshur (p206). Much like Pharaoh Sneferu 800 years before him, it's believed that Amenemhat III built Hawara at a gentler angle after his first pyramid at Dahshur showed signs of instability.

Although the Pyramid of Hawara was originally covered with white limestone casing, sadly only the mud-brick core remains today, and even the once-famous temple has been quarried. Herodotus described the temple (300m by 250m) as a 3000-room labyrinth that surpassed even the Pyramids of Giza. Strabo claimed it had as many rooms as there were provinces, so that all the pharaoh's subjects could be represented by their local officials in the presentation of offerings.

The Greeks and Romans also used the area as a cemetery: the dead were mummified in an Egyptian way, but the mummies' wrappings incorporated a portrait-style face (see boxed text, p209). Widespread excavations left little more than pieces of mummy cloth and human bones sticking up through the mounds of rubble.

The Pyramid of Hawara is notable among archaeologists for its interior, which revealed several technical developments: corridors were blocked using a series of huge stone portcullises; the burial chamber is carved from a single piece of quartzite; and the chamber was sealed by an ingenious device using sand to lower the roof block into place.

Be advised that it hasn't been possible to enter the pyramid since 1882. Note also that there are no facilities at Hawara.

Buses between Medinat al-Fayoum and Beni Suef pass through Hawarat al-Makta. From there, it is just a short walk to the pyramid.

## PYRAMID OF AL-LAHUN

About 10km southeast of Hawara, on the Nile side of the narrow fertile passage that connects Al-Fayoum to the Nile, are the ruins of the **Pyramid of Al-Lahun** (adult/student E£20/10; ⌚ 8am-4pm), built by Pharaoh Sesostris II (1880–1874 BC). The pyramid was once covered in precious limestone, but ancient tomb robbers

stripped it of all its rock and treasures, except for the amazing solid-gold uraeus that is now displayed in the Jewellery Room (Room 4) of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Note that there are no facilities at Al-Lahun.

To reach the pyramid, take any service taxi or bus running between Cairo and Beni Suef, and ask to be dropped off at the village of Al-Lahun. From here, you will have to walk for another 2km.

## LAKE QARUN

Prior to the 12th-dynasty reigns of Sesostri III and his son Amenemhat III, the Al-Fayoum region was entirely covered by Lake Qarun. In an early effort at land reclamation, however, both pharaohs dug a series of canals linking Qarun to the Nile, and drained much of the lake.

Over the past few centuries, the lake has regained some of its former grandeur due to the diversion of the Nile to create more agricultural land. However, since Lake Qarun presently sits at 45m below sea level, it has suffered from increasing salinity. Remarkably, the wildlife has adapted, and today the self-proclaimed 'world's most ancient lake' supports a unique ecosystem. There's a good chance you'll spot countless varieties of birds here including a large colony of flamingos.

Although few foreign tourists visit the lake, Qarun is a popular weekend spot for vacationing Cairenes looking to cool down. Even if you're not up for a swim, the sight of an expansive lake on the edge of the desert is quite striking, and makes a nice diversion from a morning spent pyramid-hopping.

Most visitors to the lake are content with a day trip, although an interesting place to spend the night is the historic **Auberge du Lac-Fayoum** (☎ 657 2001; s/d from US\$75/100; 🍷 🍷). It was here that world leaders met after WWI to decide on the borders of the Middle East. Later, it served as King Farouk's private hunting lodge, though these days it primarily caters to hunting groups out for ducks and geese, as well as wealthy Cairene families looking for some fresh air. Despite its four-star price, Auberge du Lac-Fayoum has seen better decades; still, it's a quiet refuge from the bump and grind of Cairo. Even if you're not spending the night at the hotel, Auberge du Lac-Fayoum is your best option for a hot meal and cold drink.

To reach Lake Qarun, take any service taxi or pick-up from Medinat al-Fayoum to

Shakshouk, the major settlement on the lake. From here, you will see English signs pointing the way to the Auberge du Lac-Fayoum.

## QASR QARUN

The ruins of ancient Dionysus, once the starting point for caravans to the Western Desert oasis of Bahariya, are near the village of Qasr Qarun at the western end of Lake Qarun. Although little remains of this historic settlement, a **Ptolemaic temple** (adult/student ££20/10; 🕒 8am-4pm), built in 4 BC and dedicated to Sobek, the crocodile-headed god of Al-Fayoum, is still standing. If you're feeling adventurous, you can go down to the underground chambers (beware of snakes), and up to the roof for a view of the desert, the sparse remains of Ptolemaic and Roman settlements, and the oasis.

Getting here is a bit of an ordeal, considering the relatively small distances involved. From Medinat al-Fayoum, take a service taxi or pick-up to the town of Abshaway and change for Qasr Qarun. The temple is just off to the left of the road shortly before the village.

## WADI RAYYAN

In the 1960s Egyptian authorities created three lakes in the Wadi Rayyan depression, southwest of Lake Qarun, to hold excess water from agricultural drainage. The lakes were intended to be the first step in an ambitious land-reclamation project, but all has not gone to plan: one of the lakes has dried up, and the other two are becoming increasingly brackish.

That said, **Wadi Rayyan** (admission ££5, vehicle ££5) does serve as a major nesting ground for birds, and is now a protected area. The lake is also a popular weekend picnic spot for escaping Cairenes, especially near 'the Waterfalls', where one lake drains into the other. Here, you'll also find a couple of small cafés and a camp site. Be advised that you officially need permission in advance from the tourist police in Medinat al-Fayoum to stay here, though a little baksheesh can smooth things over.

There is no public transport to get to Wadi Rayyan so you'll either need your own vehicle or have to hire a taxi (from Medinat al-Fayoum expect to pay about ££100 for a half-day; from Cairo it will cost about ££200 for a full day). To get to Wadi Rayyan, follow the road to the end of Lake Qarun and take the wide asphalt road to the left just after

you see the mud-brick domes of the village of Tunis (a rural retreat for Cairo's artists and Westernised intelligentsia) on a ridge to your left. An asphalt road leads right to the lake. The entrance fee is payable at a toll booth on the edge of the protected area.

## WADI AL-HITTAN

Some 55km further south into the desert at Wadi al-Hittan (Whale Valley) are the fossilised skeletons of primitive whales that have been lying here for about 40 million years. To get here is something of an expedition and requires at least two 4WDs, one to help haul the other out in the event of getting stuck in the sand. If you are interested in making the trip, it's best to inquire locally or ask the guards at Wadi Rayyan for detailed directions. And, although this should go without saying, don't underestimate how dangerous desert driving can be – be smart and stay safe!

## THE ROAD TO ALEXANDRIA

The Cairo–Alexandria Desert Hwy (known usually as the Desert Hwy) roughly separates the green fields of the Delta and the harsh sands of the Western Desert. Previously desolate, large swathes of the area's prairie-type expanses have been greened to create farms, and several new satellite towns have been established in order to ease the population pressure on Cairo. However, it's the desert life of the past that draws most tourists to this stretch, namely the famous Birqash camel market and the historic Coptic monasteries of Wadi Natrun.

## BIRQASH CAMEL MARKET

Egypt's largest **camel market** (souq al-gamaal; admission E£5; ☞ 6am–noon) is held at Birqash, a small village 35km northwest of Cairo. Until 1995 the market was held in Cairo's western suburb of Imbaba, but when land became too precious for camels, one of Cairo's age-old institutions was relocated to the edge of the Western Desert. Like all Egypt's animal markets, the Birqash camel market is not for animal lovers, nor for the faint of heart. However, if you've got a strong stomach (and better yet a weak sense of smell), a visit to Birqash is an unforgettable day trip.

While admission to the market is E£5, beware of ticket officers who may try to get you to cough up £20 to enter. The market is an easy half-day trip (one to 1½ hours) from Cairo, and one hour in the hot and dusty market is usually enough for most travellers. Note that things are most lively between 7am and 10am on Fridays.

Hundreds of camels are sold here every day, most having been brought up the Forty Days Rd from western Sudan to just north of Abu Simbel by camel herders and from there to the market in Daraw (see p299). Unsold camels are then hobbled and crammed into trucks for the 24-hour drive to Birqash. By the time they arrive, many are emaciated, fit only for the knacker's yard. Traders stand no nonsense and camels that get out of line are beaten relentlessly.

In addition to those from Sudan, there are camels from various parts of Egypt (including Sinai, the west and the south) and sometimes from as far away as Somalia. They are traded for cash or other livestock, such as goats, sheep and horses, and sold for farm work or slaughter.

While at the market, watch out for pickpockets. Women should dress conservatively – the market is very much a man's scene, with the only female presence other than the occasional traveller being the local tea lady. When you arrive, pick a strategic spot and settle in to watch the negotiations. The best area is around the middle of the lot; there are not as many camels at the entrance and at the very back, and it's noticeably scruffier there.

If you're interested in buying a camel (either for transportation or for meat – what you do with it is up to you), smaller ones cost about E£2000, while bigger beasts sometimes go for as much as E£5000. Negotiations tend to take place early in the day; by early afternoon, the market is quite subdued.

## Getting There & Away

Using public transport, the cheapest way to get to Birqash involves getting yourself to the site of the old camel market at Imbaba, from where minibuses filled with traders and potential buyers shuttle back and forth to Birqash. To get to the old camel market, take a minibus from Midan Abdel Moniem Riad or Midan Ramses to Imbaba (E£1), or one to Midan Libnan (in Mohandiseen) from where you can catch a connecting microbus. Easier

still, take a taxi from central Cairo all the way to the old site (about E£10); Imbaba airport (matar Imbaba) is the closest landmark. Once at Imbaba, ask a local to show you where to get the microbus (E£1) to Birqash. From Imbaba, the road winds through fields dotted with date palms, dusty villages, orange orchards and patches of encroaching urban sprawl before climbing the desert escarpment to the market. Microbuses from Birqash back to Imbaba leave when full: depending on the time of the day, you could wait up to two hours or so.

The easiest way to get to and from the market is to hire a private taxi for the morning. This will cost somewhere between E£70 and E£120, depending on your bargaining skills.

## WADI NATRUN

Wadi Natrun, about 100km northwest of Cairo, was of great importance to ancient Egyptians, for this was where they found natron, a substance that was crucial to the mummification process. Natron comes from large deposits of sodium carbonate that are left when the valley's salt lakes dry up every summer.

Today, natron is used on a larger scale by the chemical industry, though Wadi Natrun is primarily known for its historic Coptic Christian monasteries. Besides their solitude and serenity, the monasteries are worth visiting for the Coptic art they contain, particularly at Deir el-Sourian.

## History

A visit to the monasteries of Wadi Natrun reveals clues to the survival of the Coptic Church, for the desert has long been the protector of the faith. It was there that thousands of Christians retreated to escape Roman persecution in the 4th century. They lived in caves, or built monasteries, and developed the monastic tradition that was later adopted by European Christians.

The focal point of the monasteries was the church, around which were built a well, storerooms, a dining hall, kitchen, bakery and the monks' cells. These isolated, unprotected communities were fortified after destructive raids in 817 by Arab tribes on their way to conquer North Africa. Of the 60 monasteries once scattered over the valley, only four remain.

The religious life they helped protect is now thriving. The Coptic pope is still chosen from among the Wadi Natrun monks, and

monasticism is experiencing a revival, with young professional Copts once again donning robes and embroidered hoods to live within these ancient walls in the desert. Even today, some monks still retreat into caves in the surrounding countryside for weeks and months at a time.

## Information

Each monastery has different opening times, with some closed completely during the three annual fasting periods (Lents) at Easter, Christmas and in August. Before going, it is worth checking with their Cairo residences that visits are possible.

As a general rule, you can visit all of the monasteries without prior notice, the only exception being Deir Abu Makar (Makarios). Males wishing to stay overnight (women are not allowed to do so) need written permission from the monasteries' Cairo residences:

**Deir Anba Bishoi** (☎ 02-591 4448)

**Deir el-Baramouse** (☎ 02-592 2775)

**Deir el-Sourian** (☎ 02-592 9658)

## Sights

### DEIR ANBA BISHOI

St Bishoi founded two monasteries in Wadi Natrun: this one (which bears his name) and neighbouring Deir el-Sourian. **Deir Anba Bishoi** (☎ daily incl during Lents) is built around a church that contains the saint's body, said to be perfectly preserved in its sealed, tube-like container. Each year on 17 July, the tube is carried in procession around the church. According to the monks, the bearers clearly feel the weight of a whole body. The church also contains the cell where St Bishoi tied his hair to the ceiling to stop himself sleeping during prayers.

There's a lovely internal garden with an impressive vegetable patch, an enormous new cathedral and an interesting fortified keep that you enter via a drawbridge. This contains a well, kitchens, two churches and storerooms that can hold provisions for a year. On the roof, trap doors open to small cells that acted as makeshift tombs for those who died during frequent sieges. The rooftop is a splendid place to watch the desert sunset.

### DEIR EL-SOURIAN

About 500m northwest of Deir Anba Bishoi, **Deir el-Sourian** (Monastery of the Syrians; ☎ daily, 3-6pm Fri, 9am-6pm Sat & Sun during Lents) is named after



wandering Syrian monks who bought the monastery from the Copts in the 8th century, and is the most picturesquely situated of the monasteries. Since the 16th century it has been solely occupied by Coptic monks. Its Church of the Virgin was built around a 4th-century cave that had been occupied by St Bishoi, and is worth visiting for its superb series of 11th-century wall paintings.

#### DEIR ABU MAKAR (MAKARIOS)

Nearly 20km southeast of Deir Anba Bishoi, **Deir Abu Makar (Makarios)** (☒ daily but only by prior arrangement, closed during Lent) was founded around the cell where St Makarios spent his last 20 or so years. Structurally, it suffered more than other monasteries at the hands of raiding Bedouin, but it is famous as most of the Coptic popes over the centuries have been selected from among its monks. It is the last resting place of many of those popes and also contains the remains of the 49 Martyrs, a group of monks killed by Bedouin in 444. Deir Abu Makar is understandably the most secluded of the monasteries, so permission to visit must be requested in advance by phoning ☎ 048-260 0471/2.

#### DEIR EL-BARAMOUSE

Until recently, when a good road was built to Deir Anba Bishoi to the southeast, **Deir el-Baramouse** (☒ Fri-Sun, closed during Lent) was the most isolated of the Wadi Natrun monasteries. These days, however, more than 100 monks live here, and there are now six modern churches and a restored medieval fortress (not open to the public) within its compound. There are also remnants of 13th-century wall frescoes in its oldest church, the Church of the Virgin Mary.

When you arrive, make your way to the information office; one of the monks will then show you around.

#### Getting There & Away

You can catch a West Delta Co bus to the less than inviting town functioning as the gateway to the monasteries that goes by the grandiloquent name of Wadi Natrun City. These leave from Cairo's Turgoman Garage (p178) every 30 minutes between 6am and 10pm and cost E£5 to E£10. From the bus lot at Wadi Natrun City, you'll have to negotiate with a taxi driver to take you around the monasteries; expect to pay around E£20 per hour. On Fridays and

Sundays, when the monasteries are crowded with pious Copts, you can easily pick up a lift. The last bus back to Cairo leaves at 6pm.

A taxi from Cairo should cost about E£150 to E£200 there and back, including a couple of hours driving around the monasteries. If you have your own vehicle and you're coming from Cairo, take the Saqqara Rd and turn onto the Cairo–Alexandria Desert Hwy. After about 95km (just after the rest house and petrol station), turn left into the wadi, drive another 4km or so to Wadi Natrun City and continue on, following the signs pointing to the monasteries.

## THE NILE DELTA

North of Cairo, the Nile River divides into two branches that enter the Mediterranean at the old ports of Damietta and Rosetta, forming one of the most fertile and, unsurprisingly, most cultivated regions in the world. Laced with countless waterways, the lush, fan-shaped Nile Delta is (and has always been) the agricultural heartland of Egypt. If you have the time, it's worth the effort (and it is an effort) to get off the beaten path and explore the unique environment and culture of the Delta region.

#### NILE BARRAGES

It's great fun taking a ride on one of the ramshackle river buses that ply the Nile between Cairo and Qanater (Arabic for 'Barrages'), 16km to the north of the city where the Nile splits in two. The trip, which takes 90 minutes each way, is best done on Fridays or public holidays, when large groups of young people and smaller family parties pack the boats and the tawdry but highly atmospheric funfair and public gardens at Qanater. On the boats, Arabic pop blares and the younger passengers sing along, clap their hands, dance and decorously flirt. It's an immensely enjoyable half-day jaunt – particularly when the sun is out and the sky is clear.

The barrages were begun in the early 19th century. The series of basins and locks, on both main branches of the Nile and the two side canals, guaranteed a year-round flow of water into the Delta region and led to a great increase in cotton production.

The Damietta Barrage consists of 71 sluices stretching 521m across the river; the Rosetta



## EXPLORING THE DELTA

The Delta region played just as important a part as Upper Egypt in the early history of the country, but few archaeological remains record this. While the desert and dryness of the south helped preserve its Pharaonic sites, the amazing fertility of the Delta region had the opposite effect. Over the centuries, as the ancient cities, temples and palaces of the Delta fell into ruin, they were literally ploughed into oblivion by the fellaheen (peasant farmers).

The attraction of this area, therefore, is the chance to encounter communities rarely visited by foreigners, where you can gain insight into the Egyptian farmer's way of life. The region is also impossibly green and scenic, which can be therapeutic if you've spent too much time surrounded by swirling sand and barren rock. If you do intend spending any time in this region, we strongly recommend reading Amitav Ghosh's excellent *In An Antique Land*, an account of the author's lengthy stay in a Delta village.

Service taxis and buses crisscross the region from town to town but if you want to really explore this incredibly green countryside you'll have to hire a car. Technically speaking, you're not supposed to leave the main roads for security reasons, but in the unlikely event of being hassled by the police you can always say that you're lost. Another great way to explore the Delta is to take a ride on a river bus (see the Nile Barrages, opposite), which is essentially the Egyptian version of the 'booze cruise' (sans booze of course!).

Barrage is 438m long with 61 sluices. The area between the two at Qanater is 1km wide and filled with straggly gardens, riverside cafés and souvenir stands. The Cairene equivalent of Coney Island or Blackpool, it's particularly popular with young males, whose pastime of choice is to hire motor scooters and bikes and ride them at breakneck speed up and down the promenade, dodging indignant pedestrians and scaring the saddles off the poor horses pulling *calèches* (horse-drawn carriages) full of families up and down the Corniche.

The best way to reach the barrages is to take a privately run river bus (£6 return) from the water-taxi station in front of the Radio and TV Building (Maspero station), just north of the Ramses Hilton in central Cairo. The less-popular government-run boat leaves from the same spot but costs £10 return.

## ZAGAZIG & BUBASTIS

Just outside the city of Zagazig – that's pronounced Za'a'zi, not Zag-a-Zig – are the ruins of Bubastis, one of Egypt's most ancient cities. The great deity of the ancient city of Bubastis was the elegant cat goddess Bastet. Festivals held in her honour are said to have attracted more than 700,000 revellers who sang, danced, feasted, consumed great quantities of wine and offered sacrifices to the goddess.

Although there's not much to see in Zagazig itself, serious Egyptology buffs will enjoy a visit to the ruined **Temple of Bubastis** (adult/student ££20/10; ☒ 8am–4pm). The temple was begun by

the great pyramid-builders Khufu and Khafre during the 4th dynasty, and pharaohs of subsequent dynasties made their additions over about 17 centuries. Although this architectural gem once rose above the city, today the temple is now just a pile of rubble. However, the cat cemetery 200m down the road, which consists of a series of underground galleries where many bronze statues of cats were found, is morbidly fun to explore.

Zagazig and Bubastis are only 80km north-east of Cairo, and serve as an easy day trip from the capital. Trains heading for Port Said take about 1½ hours to get here; these leave Cairo's Ramses station (p179) at 8.45am, 11.30am, 2.30pm, 7pm and 10pm. Ticket costs for an adult/student are ££20/15 (2nd class only). From the station in Zagazig, the temple is about 1km southeast along Sharia Farouq road. Taxis (£1) can whisk you away to the site in under a minute.

## TANIS

Just outside the village of San al-Hagar, 70km northeast of Zagazig, are the partly excavated ruins of the ancient city of Tanis. Although its modern name is derived from Greek, this ancient city was Djanet to the Egyptians and Zoan to the Hebrews.

For several centuries Tanis was one of the largest cities in the Delta, and became a site of great importance after the end of the New Kingdom, especially during the Late Period (747–332 BC). Cinema buffs are also quick

to point out that Tanis is where the onscreen persona of Indiana Jones discovered the 'Lost Ark'.

Much like Bubastis, the ruins of Tanis are really only of interest to those with a strong interest in Egyptology, though it is a relatively quick and somewhat painless day trip from Cairo.

Owing to its poor state of preservation, Tanis receives few foreign visitors. However, this means that you won't have to pay an entry charge, and you'll probably have the site to yourself. You can always wander around the ruins as you like, which can be a lonely and somewhat eerie experience.

Although many of the blocks and statues found here date from the Old and Middle Kingdoms, they had been brought from other sites for reuse by later kings. The earliest buildings at Tanis actually date from the reign of Psusennes I (1039–991 BC), who surrounded the temple of Amun with a great enclosure wall. His successors added a temple to Mut, Khons and the Asiatic goddess Astarte, together with a sacred lake, and temple building continued until Ptolemaic times.

Tanis is most famous for its **royal tombs**, created by the kings of the 21st dynasty after the Valley of the Kings was abandoned at the end of the New Kingdom (c 1070 BC). In 1939 the French discovered six royal tombs here, including that of Psusennes I and several of his successors. Although the tombs themselves might seem relatively unimpressive today, they once contained some of the most spectacular treasure ever found in Egypt – gold and silver coffins, mummy masks and jewellery, which can now be seen in the Egyptian Museum (p193).

To reach Tanis, take a service taxi or bus from Cairo (E£5 to E£10) to the town of Faqus, which is about 35km south of Tanis. Alternatively, the train heading for Al-Salhiya takes about 1½ hours to get there; these leave Cairo's Ramses station (p179) approximately every two to three hours. Ticket costs for an adult/student are E£20/15 (2nd class only).

From Faqus, take a service taxi or bus (E£1) to the village of San el-Hagar, or alternatively hire a taxi (E£20) to take you to the site.

## TANTA

The largest city in the Delta, Tanta is a major centre for Sufism, and is home to a large mosque dedicated to Sayyed Ahmed al-Badawi, a Moroccan Sufi who fought the Crusaders in the 13th century. The *moulid* (religious festival) held in honour of Sayyed Ahmed al-Badawi follows the October cotton harvest, and is one of the biggest in Egypt, drawing crowds of more than one million people.

While the city itself is of little interest to foreign travellers, this area of the western Delta was once home to the ancient cities of Sais, Naucratis and Wadjet. Although these cities have been wiped off the map, anyone with a historical interest in the Delta region might be interested in knowing where they once stood.

Northwest of Tanta, on the east bank of the Rosetta branch of the Nile near the village Sa el-Hagar, once stood the legendary city of **Sais**, Egypt's 26th-dynasty capital. Sacred to Neith, goddess of war and hunting and protector of embalmed bodies, Sais dates back to the start of Egyptian history, and was replete with palaces, temples and royal tombs. However, the city was destroyed in 525 BC by the Persian emperor Cambyses, who reportedly exhumed the mummies of previous rulers from the ground and had them publicly whipped and burned.

West of Tanta, more than halfway along the road to Damanhur, once stood the city of **Naucratis**, which was given to the Greeks to settle during the 7th century BC.

Northeast of Damanhur and northwest of Tanta was the Egyptian cult centre of **Wadjet** (known as Buto to the Greeks), which honoured the cobra goddess of Lower Egypt. Cobras were once worshipped here by devout followers.

Tanta is 90km from Cairo and 110km from Alexandria. Should you have a burning interest in seeing where these cities once stood, you can take a superjet bus to Tanta (E£7 to E£12); these leave Turjoman Garage (p178) every hour between 7am and 7pm. From there, you will need to hire a taxi for an hour or so to drive you around the area.

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