

Nile Valley: Esna to Abu Simbel



One after another the great temples next come into view: Kom Ombo dominating a bend in the river, Edfu still intact on the western bank... There is a monumental stillness in the warm air, an intimation of past existence endlessly preserved...

Alan Moorhead, The Blue Nile (HarperCollins, 1962)

Where northern Upper Egypt is dominated by fast-growing cities and political problems, the country south of Luxor is both harder and calmer. The Nile is increasingly hemmed in by the desert, its banks lined with well-preserved Graeco-Roman temples at Esna, Edfu and Kom Ombo, its lush fields punctuated by palm-backed villages – it's the perfect place to glide through on a Nile sailing boat. Al-Kab provides the perfect contrast to the grandeur of the temples, for this once-great city has almost completely disappeared. Beyond Edfu the ribbon of cultivation on the Nile's east bank gives way to the Eastern (Arabian) Desert, while at Gebel Silsila, 145km south of Luxor, the river passes through a gorge, once thought to mark a cataract.

Aswan may be the regional capital and administrative centre, but this ancient ivory-trading post has a laid-back atmosphere that sets it apart from other tourist centres in Egypt. With the Nubia Museum, ancient remains, a vibrant souq, beautiful gardens and a unique Nubian-influenced local culture, it is a fascinating and relaxing place to spend time.

South of Aswan, the land is dominated by the High Dam and its offspring, Lake Nasser, the world's largest artificial lake. Remarkable monuments that would have been lost to the lake's waters now stand grouped on its shores and can be visited by boat. Most southerly and spectacular of all is the Great Temple of Ramses II at Abu Simbel, one of ancient Egypt's most awesome structures and a highlight of any visit to Egypt.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Marvel at the most completely preserved Egyptian temple and get lost in its inner chambers all perfectly carved with sacred formulae, at the **Temple of Horus** (p294) at Edfu
- See where the pharaohs found their building blocks and get a sense of the connection between Egyptian religion and the Nile at the quarries and shrines of **Gebel Silsila** (p296)
- Wander around the rarely visited but fascinating ruins of the ancient settlement of **Abu** (p305) on Elephantine Island
- Sense Pharaoh Ramses II's vanity in the grandest temple he ever built, the awe-inspiring **Great Temple** (p324) at Abu Simbel
- Enjoy the peace of **Lake Nasser** (p321) and the rescued temples, and get an idea of the Nubian history and culture that were submerged by it at the **Nubia Museum** (p302) in Aswan



History

The Nile valley south of Luxor was the homeland of the vulture and crocodile gods, a place of harsh nature and grand landscapes. Its cult places, centres such as Al-Kab and Kom al-Ahmar, date back to the earliest periods of Egyptian history – it was here that the Narmer Palette was found, the object around which the origins of the 1st dynasty have been constructed, here that one of the earliest-known Egyptian temples, made of wood not stone, has been found and here that recently found Lascaux-type rock carvings have opened a window into Egypt's remotest past.

Yet most of what one can see between Luxor and Aswan dates from the last period of ancient Egyptian history, when the country was ruled by the descendants of Alexander the Great's Macedonian general, Ptolemy. They ruled for some 300 years, respecting the country's ancient traditions and religion and setting an example to the Romans who succeeded them.

Although they were based in Alexandria and looked out to the Mediterranean, the Ptolemies pushed their way south into Nubia, the land that straddled what is now the border between Egypt and Sudan. They ensured peaceful rule in Upper Egypt by erecting temples in honour of the local gods, building in grand Pharaonic style to appease the priesthood and earn the trust of the people. The riverside temples at Esna, Edfu, Kom Ombo and Philae are as notable for their strategic locations, on ancient trade routes or key commercial centres, as for their artistic or architectural merit.

Aswan's history was always going to be different. However much the rulers in the north, whether Theban or Macedonian, may have wanted to ignore the south, they dared not neglect their southern border. Settlement on Elephantine Island, located in the middle of the Nile at Aswan, dates back at least to 3000 BC. Named Abu (Ivory) after the trade that flourished here, it was a natural fortress positioned just north of the First Nile Cataract, one of six sets of rapids that blocked the river between Aswan and Khartoum. At the beginning of Egypt's dynastic history, in the Old Kingdom (2686–2181 BC), Abu became capital of the first Upper Egyptian nome (province) and developed into a thriving economic and religious centre, its strategic importance underlined by the title

accorded to its rulers, Keepers of the Gate of the South. By the end of ancient history, with Egypt part of a larger Roman Empire, the southern frontier town was seen as a place of exile for anyone from the north who stepped out of line.

Climature

Heading south from Luxor, the fertile green Nile Valley narrows considerably and becomes more and more enclosed by the desert, which in some places edges dramatically close to the river banks. The climate also changes and becomes increasingly desertlike, with mostly warm and dry days in winter – there's an average temperature of about 26°C during the day – but often surprisingly cold at night. Summer days are dry but often very hot, with temperatures hovering between 38°C and 45°C, making it difficult to visit sites outdoors. At the height of summer, temperatures hardly seem to drop during the night.

Getting There & Away

Constant police checkpoints and an insistence that foreigners travel in convoys make independent road travel in southern Upper Egypt almost, but not entirely, impossible (see the boxed text, opposite). The police in Aswan often don't allow foreigners to travel on any public bus north of Aswan, and certainly don't allow travel by service taxi. Travelling by train is recommended as it allows a little more freedom. Officially foreigners are only allowed to travel on three particular trains a day, but usually you can get on any other train, although it might be wise to buy your ticket on board. It is possible to hire a private taxi from Aswan to Luxor, although you will have to be part of the morning convoy that stops at the Temple of Kom Ombo for about half an hour, and at the Temple of Horus at Edfu for one hour.

Travel to Abu Simbel has become much easier again. Foreigners can take buses (officially only four foreigners are allowed on each bus), minibuses and private taxis, all still in a police convoy. The plane remains the fastest, if most expensive, option.

Getting Around

Foreigners are restricted from travelling between towns in the far south of Egypt, but the rules within municipal boundaries keep

TRAVELLING IN THE SOUTH

In the aftermath of the 1990s deadly terrorist attacks on tourists, police introduced security measures designed to protect tourists in the heavily travelled area between Luxor and Aswan. This means that all sites have armed police protection and, more importantly, that foreigners can only travel between towns in police convoy. Independent travellers are prevented from taking buses or service taxis, can only spend the same amount of time at sites as hundreds of other people as they have to join the convoy, and are forbidden from wandering about in villages or back lanes.

There have been no violent incidents in the south since 1997, but the threat remains proven by a series of attacks on tourists in Cairo in early 2005, so the security forces are unlikely to lighten their heavy-handed tactics any time soon. Some people feel more secure under police protection, but most don't: high speeds and dangerous driving in the convoy seem to pose a greater risk to travellers than terrorism. But this is Egypt and the rules are often bent: depending on the tension in the area or town, on how foreign you look or on the mood of the official in charge, you may be left alone to walk around and see whatever you want, or you maybe escorted to the station and put on the first train out.

on changing, and differ from place to place, from police officer to police officer. In some places foreigners are pretty much left alone and can use communal taxis (usually pick-up trucks) outside Aswan (fares are 25pt to 50pt). But in some towns, security people will be waiting to grab foreigners from the train and will insist on escorting them to their hotel and everywhere else they want to go. Security tightens considerably if there has been any kind of incident in the town, not necessarily related to tourists or terrorism.

SOUTHERN UPPER EGYPT

ESNA

☎ 095 / pop 71,588

Most visitors come to Esna, 54km south of Luxor on the west bank of the Nile, for the Temple of Khnum, but the busy little farming town itself is quite charming. Beyond the small bazaar selling mainly tourist souvenirs are several examples of 19th-century provincial architecture with elaborate *mashrabiyya* (ornate carved wooden screens) and a beautiful caravanserai southwest of the temple. An old oil mill, in the covered souq east of the temple, presses lettuce seed into oil, a powerful aphrodisiac since ancient times. Esna was until the early 20th century an important stop on the camel caravan route between Sudan and Cairo, and between the Western Desert oases and the Nile Valley. The town could be a pleasant

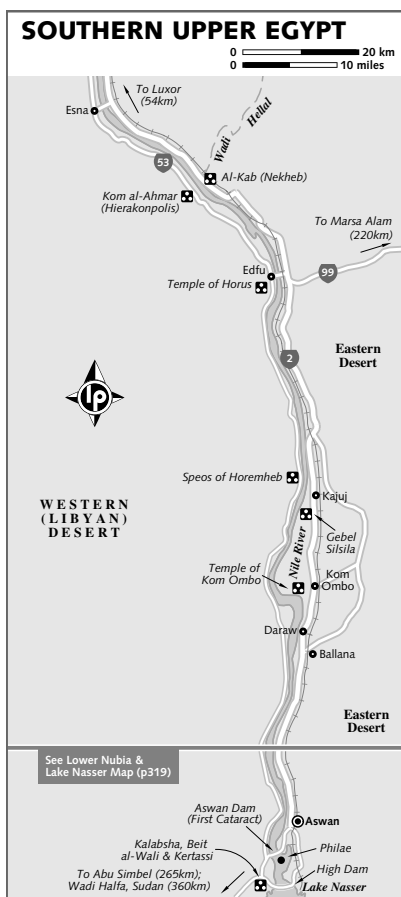
morning excursion from Luxor, but with current security restrictions, you will be lucky if the convoy stops here en route to Edfu and Aswan. You can currently visit Esna as part of a cruise itinerary down the Nile (see p83).

The post office and a branch of the Bank of Alexandria are on the street leading from the canal to the Nile. The **tourist police office** (☎ 240 0686) is in the bazaar near the temple.

Temple of Khnum

The Ptolemaic-Roman **Temple of Khnum** (adult/student E£15/10; ☎ 6am-4pm Oct-May, to 5pm Jun-Sep) is situated about 200m from the boat landing, at the end of the tourist souq. The temple today sits in a 9m-deep pit, which represents 15 centuries of desert sand and debris, accumulated since it was abandoned during the Roman period. Most of the temple, which was similar in size to the temples of Edfu (see p293) and Dendara (see p235), is still covered. All that was excavated in the 1840s, all you can see now, is the Roman hypostyle hall.

Khnum was the ram-headed creator god who fashioned humankind on his potter's wheel using Nile clay. Construction of the temple dedicated to him was started, on the site of an earlier temple, by Ptolemy VI Philometor (180–145 BC). The Romans added the hypostyle hall that can be visited today, with well-preserved carvings from as late as the 3rd century AD. A quay connecting the temple to the Nile was built by Marcus Aurelius (AD 161–180).



The central doorway leads into the dark atmospheric vestibule, where the roof is supported by 18 columns with wonderfully varied floral capitals in the form of palm leaves, lotus buds and papyrus fans; some also have bunches of grapes, a distinctive Roman touch. The roof is decorated with astronomical scenes, while the pillars are covered with hieroglyphic accounts of temple rituals. Inside the front corners, beside the smaller doorways, are two hymns to Khnum. The first is a morning hymn to awaken Khnum in his shrine, and the second is a wonderful 'hymn of creation' that acknowledges him as creator of all, even foreigners: 'all are formed on his potter's wheel, their speech different in

every region but the lord of the wheel is their father too'.

On the walls Roman emperors dressed as pharaohs make offerings to the local gods of Esna. The northern (right) wall has colourful scenes of the ruler catching fish in a papyrus thicket with the god Khnum, and next to this the emperor presents the temple to Khnum.

The back wall, to the northeast, the only remaining part of the original Ptolemaic temple, features reliefs of two Ptolemaic pharaohs, Ptolemy VI Philometor and Ptolemy VIII Euergetes (170–116 BC). A number of Roman emperors, including Septimius Severus, Caracalla and Geta, added their names near the hall's rear gateway.

Eating & Drinking

Few people linger in Esna as it is so close to Luxor and the police hurry visitors back into the convoy. There are a few food stands with snacks and *ahwas* (coffeehouses) in the souq leading to the temple.

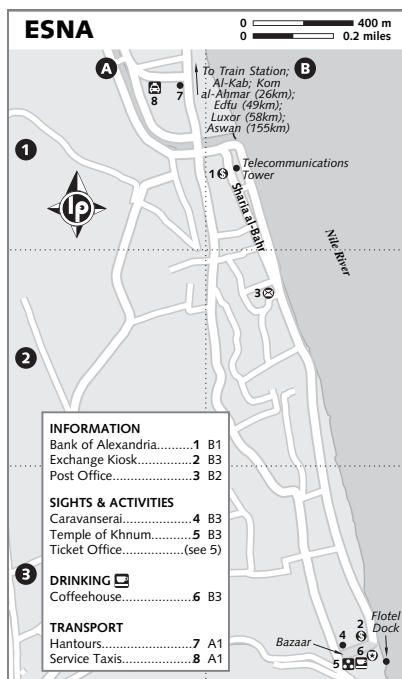
Getting There & Away

Trains are a pain because the train station is on the opposite (east) bank of the Nile, away from the town centre. Buses to Luxor (££7, 8.30am, 5.30pm and 8pm) and Aswan (££18, 8am and 10am) run on the main east-bank Luxor–Aswan road, stopping only briefly to pick up passengers, if you are allowed to get on at all. Esna's service-taxi station is next to the canal, although arrivals are generally dropped off on the main thoroughfare into town along which *hantour* (horse-drawn carriage) drivers congregate in the hope of picking up a fare. They ask ££8 each way for the five- to 10-minute ride to the temple.

AL-KAB & KOM AL-AHMAR

Between Esna and Edfu are the ruins of two settlements, both dating back more than 3000 years, with traces of even earlier habitation.

The little-visited site of **Al-Kab** (adult/student ££25/15), ancient Nekheh, is one of the most important sites of ancient Egypt. It was the home of Nekheh, the vulture goddess of Upper Egypt, one of two goddesses who protected the pharaoh right back to the Old Kingdom. There isn't much to see, but the remains of the 12m-thick mud-brick walls that surrounded the town are impressive and date back to the Late Period (747–332 BC).



The oldest of the sandstone temples within the walls dedicated to the god Thoth was built by Ramses II (1279–1213 BC) and the adjoining Temple of Nekhbet was built during the Late Period, both reusing blocks from much earlier temples from the Early Dynastic Period (c 3100 BC) and the Middle Kingdom (2055–1650 BC).

To the northwest of the walls is an Old Kingdom cemetery. Across the road, cut into the hill at the edge of the valley, are tombs of New Kingdom local governors. The most important is the **Tomb of Ahmose**, son of Ebana (tomb No 2), the ‘Captain-General of Sailors’, who fought under Ahmose I against the Hyksos. The old soldier left a long, detailed biographical inscription describing his bravery. Further east were several temples dedicated to Nubian gods. A Ptolemaic temple has a staircase going up to two columned vestibules before a chapel carved into the rock. South of there is a small chapel, locally known as Al-Hammam, (the ‘Bath’ or ‘Toilet’) built by Setau, Viceroy of Nubia under Ramses II. At the centre of the wadi, ‘Vulture Rock’ takes its name from a large

vulture-shaped crag covered in inscriptions from predynastic times to the Old Kingdom. Some 3.5km further east into the desert is the small chapel of Nekhbet, built by Amenhotep III (1390–1352 BC) as a way station for the vulture goddess’ cult statue when she passed through ‘The Valley’. Her protective influence was no doubt appreciated, as this was one of the supply routes to the gold mines that gave Egypt much of its wealth.

Across the river lies **Kom al-Ahmar**, ancient Nekhen or Hierakonpolis, home of the falcon god Nekheny, an early form of Horus. Although little remains of what was one of Egypt’s most important cities in predynastic times, recent excavations have revealed a large settlement (with Egypt’s earliest brewery!), a predynastic cemetery dating from around 3400 BC with elephant and cattle burials, together with the site of Egypt’s earliest known temple, a large timber-framed structure fronted by 12m-high imported wood pillars. A century ago, within this sacred enclosure, archaeologists discovered a range of ritual artefacts, among them two items of huge historical significance, the Narmer Palette and a superb gold falcon head of the god Horus, both now in Cairo’s Egyptian Museum.

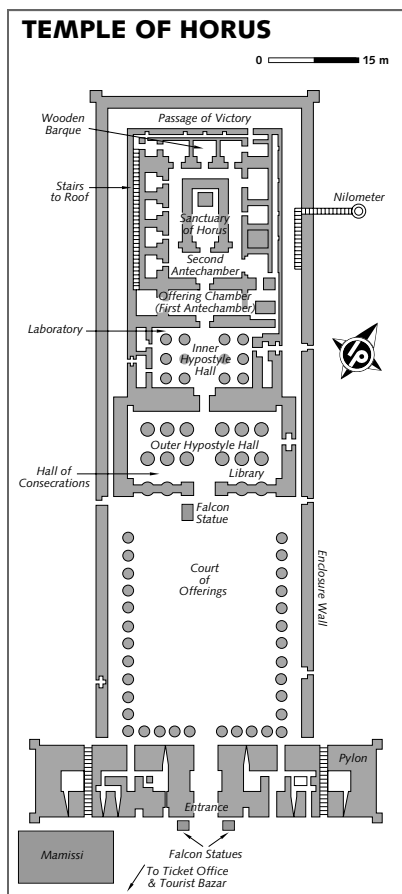
Close by is Egypt’s oldest standing brick building, an enigmatic mud-brick enclosure known as ‘the Fort’, built by Khasekhemuy (c 2686 BC). The impressive rock-cut tombs on the west bank were built by New Kingdom dignitaries.

Al-Kab and Kom al-Ahmar are 26km south of Esna. The best option to see these sites is to take a dahabiyya (houseboat) or felucca (traditional canvas-sailed boat) from Aswan to Esna, or the other way around. See p83 for more information. Convoys do not stop here. Other than jumping, undetected, off a bus and taking a chance on finding a ride out when you’ve finished, there’s little chance of seeing these monuments by land.

EDFU

☎ 097 / pop 72,979

Built on a rise above the broad river valley, the Temple of Horus at Edfu, having escaped destruction from Nile floods, is the most completely preserved Egyptian temple. One of the last ancient attempts at building on a grand scale, the temple dominates this west-bank town, 53km south of Esna. The



each with different floral capitals. The walls are decorated with reliefs, including the 'Feast of the Beautiful Meeting' just inside the entrance, the meeting being that of Horus of Edfu and Hathor of Dendara, who visited each other's temples each year and, after two weeks of great fertility celebrations, were magically united.

A second set of Horus falcon statues in black granite once flanked the entrance to the temple's first or **outer hypostyle hall**, but today only one remains. Inside the entrance of the outer hypostyle hall, to the left and right, are two small chambers: the one on the right was the temple **library** where the ritual texts were stored; and the chamber on the left the **hall of consecrations**, a vestry where freshly laundered

robes and ritual vases were kept. The hall itself has 12 columns, and the walls are decorated with reliefs of the temple's founding.

The **inner hypostyle hall** also has 12 columns, and in the top left part of the hall is perhaps this temple's most interesting room: the temple **laboratory**. Here, all the necessary perfumes and incense recipes were carefully brewed up and stored, their ingredients listed on the walls.

On either side of the hall, doorways lead into the narrow **passage of victory**, which runs between the temple and its massive protective enclosure walls. This narrow ambulatory is decorated with scenes that are of tremendous value to Egyptologists in trying to understand the nature of the ancient temple rituals. Reliefs here show the dramatic reenactment of the battle between Horus and Seth at the annual Festival of Victory. Throughout the conflict, Seth is shown in the form of a hippopotamus, his tiny size rendering him less threatening. At the culmination of the drama, priests are shown cutting up a hippo-shaped cake and eating it together completely.

Back in the inner hypostyle hall, exit through the large central doorway to enter the **offering chamber**, or first antechamber, which has an altar where daily offerings of fruit, flowers, wine, milk and other foods were left. On the west side, 242 steps lead up to the rooftop and a fantastic view of the Nile and the surrounding fields. You may have to pay the guard a bit of baksheesh if you want to go up here.

The second antechamber gives access to the **sanctuary of Horus**, which still contains the polished-granite shrine that once housed the gold cult statue of Horus. Created during the reign of Nectanebo II (360–343 BC), this statue was reused by the Ptolemies in their newer temple. All around Horus' sanctuary are smaller shrines of other gods, including Hathor, Ra and Osiris, and, at the very back, a modern reproduction of the wooden barque in which Horus' statue would be taken out of the temple in procession during festive occasions.

On the eastern enclosure wall look for the remains of the Nilometer, which measured the level of the river and helped predict the coming harvest. For more on Nilometers and their importance in ancient Egypt, see the boxed text, p318.

Sleeping & Eating

Al-Medina Hotel (☎ 471 1326; off Sharia Gumhuriyya; s/d with bathroom & fan ££40/50) This option is very basic, with threadbare furniture and an erratic hot-water system.

ourpick Horus Hotel (☎ 471 5284/86; Sharia al-Gumhuriyya; s/d/tr ££72/132/195) This new hotel, opposite Omar Effendi department store, is the best option in town. It's on the upper floors of the building, with cheerful brightly coloured rooms, with fans or with air-con, and very clean shared bathrooms. The staff is friendly and helpful, and the restaurant (mains ££40 to ££44) is one up on other eateries in town.

There are a few kebab places on the main square, and several cafeterias on the waterfront, Sharia an-Nil, including internet café **Koko** (☎ 010 440 1196). At all of these places you should ask how much dishes cost before you order. There is a daily food and vegetable souq just off the main square.

Next door to Koko you will find the pleasant Habiba café for tea and snacks and there are a few cafés, mostly men only, around the main square.

Getting There & Away

Edfu train station is on the east bank of the Nile, about 4km from town. There are frequent trains heading to Luxor and Aswan throughout the day, although most are 2nd and 3rd class only. To get to the town, you must first take a covered pick-up truck from the train station to the bridge, then another into town. Each costs 50pt. Alternatively, hire an entire pick-up to take you to the main square for about ££8.

Upper Egypt Bus Co (off Sharia Gumhuriyya) operates frequent buses to Luxor (££15, two hours) and Aswan (££12, 1½ hours). Marsa Alam micro-buses (££20, three to four hours) originate in Aswan and pick up passengers at the café by the entrance to the desert road on the east bank at about 7.30am and 8.30am.

The easiest option to visit Edfu is to take a day tour or travel in a private taxi (££180 to ££250 return) in the 7am convoy from Luxor.

GEBEL SILSILA

At Gebel Silsila, about 42km south of Edfu, the Nile narrows considerably to pass between steep sandstone cliffs that are cluttered with ancient rock stelae and graffiti. Known in Pharaonic times as Khenu (Place of Rowing),

it was an important centre for the cult of the Nile: every year at the beginning of the inundation season, sacrifices were made here to insure the fertility of the land. The Nile at its height flowing through the narrow gorge must have been a particularly impressive sight, which no doubt explains why the location was chosen as a cult centre. The gorge also marks the change from limestone to sandstone in the bedrock of Egypt. The sandstone quarries here were worked by thousands of men and, judging by the names of pharaohs inscribed in the caves, it seems they were worked from the 18th dynasty or earlier through to the Roman period. The quarries were for centuries the main source in Egypt of sandstone for temple building.

The most attractive monuments are on the west bank, where the rocks are carved with inscriptions and tiny shrines from all periods, as well as adorned with larger chapels. The southern side of the site is marked by a massive pillar of rock, known as the 'Capstan', so called because locals believe there was once a chain, *silsila* in Arabic, from which the place takes its name, that ran from the east to the west bank. Nearby are the three shrines built by Merneptah, Ramses II and Seti I during the New Kingdom. Further north, the main quarry has clear masons' marks and a group of elaborate private memorial chapels. Several stelae, including a large **Stelae of Shoshenq I**, mark the northern limit of the quarry and lead to the **Speos of Horemheb** (adult/student ££25/15; ☎ 7am-5pm), a rock-hewn chapel started by Horemheb (1323-1295 BC) and finished by the officials of the later Ramesside kings.

The more impressive quarries are to be found on the east bank of the river, with several stelae in memory of pharaohs from different periods and *ex votos*. Here one gets a real sense of the grandeur and the enormity of what the pharaohs undertook, by just looking at the cubist landscape of the gigantic shelves adorned with quarry marks and drawings, left by the removal of the sandstone blocks for the temples.

At present you can only get to Gebel Silsila by felucca or dahabiyya from Aswan to Esna, or the other way around. See p83 for more information. Should the security situation change, you may be able to hire a taxi from Edfu to take you to the village of Kajuj, 41km south of Edfu, then take the track to the quarries on the east bank of the Nile, or negoti-

ate with a boatman to take you across to the west bank.

KOM OMBO

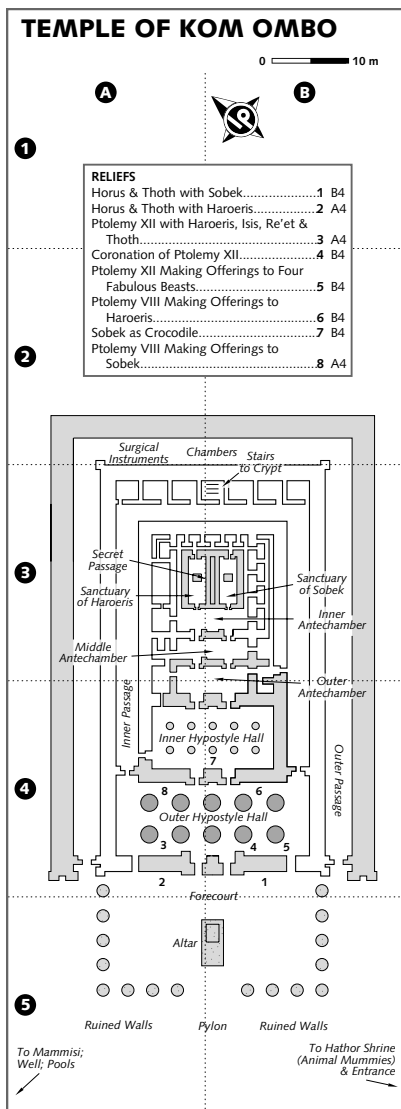
☎ 097 / pop 80,991

The fertile, irrigated sugarcane and cornfields around Kom Ombo, 65km south of Edfu, support not only the original community of fellahen (peasant farmers), but also a large population of Nubians displaced from their own lands by the creation of Lake Nasser (see p320). It's a pleasant little place, easily accessible en route between Aswan and Luxor. A huge cattle market is held on the outskirts of town, near the railway line, on Thursday. The main attraction these days, however, is the unique riverside Temple of Horus the Elder (Haroeris) and Sobek, about 4km from the town's centre, which stands gloriously on a promontory overlooking the Nile. If you're not stopping here on a felucca trip or Nile cruise, it's best visited on a day trip from Aswan (40km to the south) taking the morning police convoy, or on the morning convoy from Aswan to Luxor, which stops at the temple for just 30 to 35 minutes.

In ancient times Kom Ombo was known as Pa-Sebek (Land of Sobek), after the crocodile god of the region. It became important during the Ptolemaic period, when its name was changed to Ombos and it became the capital of the first Upper Egyptian nome during the reign of Ptolemy VI Philometor. Kom Ombo was an important military base and a trading centre between Egypt and Nubia. Gold was traded here, but more importantly it was a market for African elephants brought from Ethiopia, which the Ptolemies needed to fight the Seleucids, who ruled the largest chunk of Alexander's former empire to the east of Egypt.

Temple of Kom Ombo

Standing on a promontory at a bend in the Nile, where in ancient times sacred crocodiles basked in the sun on the riverbank, is the **Temple of Kom Ombo** (adult/student ££25/15; ☎ 6am-4pm Oct-May, to 5pm Jun-Sep). Unique in Egypt it has a dual dedication to the local crocodile god Sobek and Haroeris, from *har-wer*, meaning Horus the Elder. This is reflected in the temple's plan: perfectly symmetrical along the main axis of the temple, there are twin entrances, two shared hypostyle halls with



carvings of the two gods on either side and twin sanctuaries. It is assumed that there were also two priesthoods. The left (western) side of the temple was dedicated to Haroeris, the right (eastern) half to Sobek.

Reused blocks suggest an earlier temple from the Middle Kingdom period, and there are remains of 18th-dynasty structures, but the

LASCAUX ON THE NILE

Belgian archaeologists recently discovered the oldest drawings in Egypt at a site near Kom Ombo. Palaeolithic animal illustrations, similar to those found in the Lascaux caves in France, have been discovered on huge Nubian sandstone rocks in the village of Qurta, on the northern edge of Kom Ombo. Most of these fine paintings are of bovinds in different positions. There are also gazelles, birds, hippos and fish in a naturalistic style, and a few stylised human figures with pronounced buttocks but no other particular features.

These discoveries represent some of the largest and finest examples of rock art ever found. Many of the paintings were first carved in the rock surface, almost like a bas-relief, and then painted. It is thought they were produced by the Ballanan-Silsilian culture, dated to about 16,000 to 15,000 years ago, which corresponds climatologically with the end of a hyperarid period, before the return of the rains and the 'Wild Nile' stage of about 14,000 to 13,000 years ago. The artists appear to have been hunters and fishermen.

As the art is very fragile, the site is still closed to the public.

main temple dates from Ptolemaic times; built by Ptolemy VI Philometor, though most of its decoration was completed by Cleopatra VII's father, Ptolemy XII Neos Dionysos. The temple's spectacular riverside setting has resulted in the erosion of part of its partly Roman forecourt and outer sections, but much of the complex has survived and is very similar in layout to the other Ptolemaic temples of Edfu and Dendara, albeit smaller.

The temple is entered through the Ptolemaic gateway on the southeast corner. Nearby, to the right of the temple wall, is a small **shrine to Hathor**, now a storage for the **mummified crocodiles** and their clay coffins that were dug up from a nearby sacred-animal cemetery; four from the collection are on display. On the opposite side of the compound, to the left (southwest) corner of the temple are the remains of a small **mammisi**, decorated with reliefs, including one that depicts Ptolemy VIII Euergetes in a boat in a reed thicket before the god Min. Beyond this to the north you will find the deep well that supplied the temple with water, and close by is a small pool in which crocodiles, Sobek's sacred animal, were raised.

Passing into the temple's **forecourt**, where the reliefs are divided between the two gods, there is a double altar in the centre of the court for both gods. Beyond are the shared **inner and outer hypostyle halls**, each with 10 columns. Inside the **outer hypostyle hall**, to the left, is a finely executed relief showing Ptolemy XII Neos Dionysos being presented to Haroeris by Isis and the lion-headed goddess Raetawy, with Thoth looking on. The walls to the right show the crowning of Ptolemy XII by Nekhbet

(the vulture goddess worshipped at the Upper Egyptian town of Al-Kab) and Wadjet (the snake goddess based at Buto in Lower Egypt), with the dual crown of Upper and Lower Egypt, symbolising the unification of Egypt.

Reliefs on the north wall of the **inner hypostyle hall** show Haroeris presenting Ptolemy VIII Euergetes with a curved weapon, representing the sword of victory. Behind Ptolemy is his sister-wife and coruler Cleopatra II.

From here, three **antechambers**, each with double entrances, lead to the **sanctuaries of Sobek and Haroeris**. The now-ruined chambers on either side would have been used to store priests' vestments and liturgical papyri. The sanctuaries themselves are no longer completely intact, allowing you to see the secret passage between them that enabled the priests to give the gods a 'voice' to answer the petitions of pilgrims.

The outer corridor, which runs around the temple walls, is unusual. Here, on the left-hand (northern) corner of the temple's back wall, is a puzzling scene, which is often described as a collection of 'surgical instruments'. It seems more probable that these were implements used during the temple's daily rituals.

Sleeping & Eating

At the time of writing, foreigners were not allowed to stay in Kom Ombo, so press on to Luxor or Aswan.

Al-Noba Restaurant (main rd; meals E£8-15) A little way north of the service-taxi station, Al-Noba is the only sit-down eatery in this part of town and it serves chicken, rice and vegetable dishes.

Otherwise, the choice is between *ta'amiyya* and kebab stands. Snacks and drinks can be bought at the series of cafeterias and tourist bazaars, called Rural Home, in the shade of the trees between the temple and the Nile. Cafeteria Venus on the north side of the temple has cold beers in a pleasant garden setting, but foreigners are often not allowed to leave the temple compound to reach it.

Getting There & Away

The easiest way to visit the temple is to come on a tour or via a private taxi, travelling with the convoy. A private taxi from Luxor taking in both Edfu and Kom Ombo and returning in the evening can cost from about £255 to £300.

The Luxor–Aswan buses also frequently stop in the town. As you approach Kom Ombo from Aswan, you can ask the driver to drop you off at the road leading to the temple; look for the sign. From here it's about a 2km walk. Should you want to head to the Red Sea from here, the daily bus from Aswan to Marsa Alam (££20, four to five hours) calls in at around 7.30am.

Trains are another option, but the train station is some way from the temple.

To get to the temple from the town centre, take a covered pick-up (25pt to 40pt) to the boat landing on the Nile about 800m north of the temple, then walk the remainder of the way. Pick-ups to the boat landing leave from the service-taxi station. A private taxi between the town and temple should cost about £10 return.

DARAW

Daraw, 8km south of Kom Ombo, appears to be like any other village in this part of Egypt, except for its remarkable **camel market** (*souq al-gimaal*). Most of the camels are brought up in caravans from Sudan to just north of Abu Simbel (see the boxed text, p300), from where they're trucked to Daraw. The rest walk to the market in smaller groups, entering Egypt at Wadi al-Alagi and making their way through the Eastern Desert.

Camels are sold here each day of the week, but the main caravan of camels from Abu Simbel, sometimes as many as 2000 of them, is brought to market on Sunday.

Also worth seeing is the Nubian house called **Hosh al-Kenzi**. Built in 1912 by the father of the current resident, Haj Mohammed Eid Mohammed Hassanein, it is constructed in

traditional Nubian style and decorated with Nubian artefacts. To get there, ask for the Dar Rasoul Mosque on Sharia al-Kunuz. The house is clearly visible next door.

Getting There & Away

Trains between Aswan and Luxor usually stop at Daraw. By road you are likely to be forced to go by convoy to Daraw, which is usually arranged via the tourist office in Aswan (p301). Should all this change, service taxis and minibuses running between Aswan and Kom Ombo stop in Daraw (if passengers indicate that they want to get off). The £5 fare is the same as for the whole stretch. The camel market is on a large lot 2km from the Luxor–Aswan highway. Turn off at the main road into the town and ask for 'souq al-gimaal'.

ASWAN

☎ 097 / pop 1.18 million

On the northern end of the First Cataract and marking the country's ancient southern frontier, Aswan has always been of great strategic importance. In ancient times it was a garrison town for the military campaigns against Nubia, its quarries provided the valuable granite used for so many sculptures and obelisks, and it was a prosperous marketplace at the crossroads of the ancient caravan routes. The first document mentioning Aswan, rather than the older island settlement of Abu, date to the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BC) and use the ancient Egyptian word *swenet*, meaning 'trade', a name that later became the Arabic As-Suan, meaning markets.

Today, slower than most places in Egypt, laid-back and pleasant, it is the perfect place to linger for a few days, rest the eyes and the mind, and recover from the rigours of travelling along the Nile. The river is wide, languorous and stunningly beautiful here, flowing gently down from Lake Nasser, around dramatic black-granite boulders and palm-studded islands. Colourful Nubian villages run down to the water and stand out against the backdrop of the desert on the west bank.

With so long a history, there is plenty to see in Aswan, but somehow the sight-seeing seems less urgent and certainly less overwhelming than, say, Luxor, allowing more time to take in the magic of the Nile at sunset, to stroll in the exotic souq, one of the best outside Cairo, or to appreciate

THE FORTY DAYS ROAD

Large caravans of camels are brought through the desert from Sudan's Darfur and Kordofan provinces to Daraw, along the Forty Days Rd (Darb al-Arba'a'een), allegedly named for the number of days it took to walk.

At first, after the Persians introduced camels into the region (around the 6th century BC), the animals carried slaves, ostrich feathers, precious stones, animal skins and other goods from Africa, much appreciated by the pharaohs and their officials, or later, distributed to the great empires in Greece, Persia and Rome.

Trading caravans were replaced by the faster railway at the end of the 19th century, but the camels still come, except now they are the cargo. Once in Daraw, they spend two days in quarantine, where they are inoculated against a number of diseases. After they have been sold by the Sudanese owners, most go on to the camel market in Birqash, about 35km northwest of Cairo (see p212), and from there they are sold again. Some are sold to Egyptian farmers, others are exported to other Middle Eastern countries, but many are slaughtered to provide meat for poor Egyptians (yes, that cheap kebab does taste a bit mature).

the gentleness of the Nubians. Most tour groups head straight for the Temple of Isis at Philae, taking in the Unfinished Obelisk and the dams on the way, but the rarely visited ruins of ancient Abu and the small Aswan Museum on Elephantine Island are fascinating, as are the exquisite botanical gardens and the Nubia Museum.

But Aswan is more than just a tourist town; a governorate capital, it has a large population of educated bureaucrats and a good university. Some days, when all the cruise boats seem to unload their tour groups at the same time, it is no longer as relaxed as it was a few years ago. But much of the time the heat, the sweet smells of spices and the slow pace take hold of the visitor. Few things are more calming than to glide on a felucca between the islands and the rocks at sunset, or failing that to sit on the banks and watch the Nile go by.

The best time to visit Aswan is in winter, when the days are warm and dry. In summer the temperature hovers between 38°C and 45°C; it's too hot by day to do anything but sit by a fan and swat flies, or flop into a swimming pool.

ORIENTATION

Most of the city of interest to visitors is along the Nile or parallel to it. The train station is at the northern end of town, only 100m from the river and the Corniche an-Nil.

The street running north-south in front of the train station is Sharia as-Souq (also occasionally signposted as Sharia Saad Zaghloul). This is Aswan's market street, where the

souq overflows with colourful, tempting and aromatic wares. Running parallel to it is Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir, where you'll find the youth hostel and a few budget and mid-range hotels. Most of Aswan's government buildings, banks, travel agencies, restaurants and top-end hotels are on Corniche an-Nil. From the Corniche, ferries and feluccas sail to the rock tombs on the west bank or to Elephantine Island.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

The New Cataract Hotel (Map p302) has a small bookshop with a good selection of foreign-language books about Aswan, Egypt and Egyptian history. Stalls in the tourist bazaar at the exit of the Unfinished Obelisk (see p303) also have some good books on Egypt and Nubia. If you're after international newspapers and magazines, try the newsstand near the Philae Hotel on the Corniche.

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 123)

Police (Map p304; ☎ 230 2043; Corniche an-Nil) Near Thomas Cook.

Tourist police (Map p304; ☎ 230 3436, 231 4393; Corniche an-Nil) Contact the tourist office (opposite) first to help with translation.

Internet Access

Internet prices cost E£6 to E£15 per hour.

Aswan Internet Café (Map p304; ☎ 231 4472; Rowing Club, Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 9am-midnight Sun-Fri)

Aswanet Internet Café (Map p304; ☎ 231 7332; Keylany Hotel, 25 Sharia Keylany; ☎ 9am-11pm) A local

internet service provider, the excellent Aswanet has the fastest lines in town.

Nubani Café Net (Map p304; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; ☎ 24hr)

Tarek for Computer Services (Map p304; ☎ 012 381 7534; Sharia Ahmed Maher; ☎ 9am-11pm)

Medical Services

German Hospital (Map p302; ☎ 231 7176; Corniche an-Nil)

Mubarak Military Hospital (Map p302; ☎ 231 7985, 231 4739; Tariq Sadat) The top hospital in town.

Ta'mim (Insurance) Hospital (Map p302; ☎ 231 5112, 231 6510; Tariq Sadat) Newest hospital in town with a good reputation.

Money

Unless otherwise noted, banking hours are 8.30am to 2pm and 5pm to 8pm Sunday to Thursday. There are ATMs all along the Corniche and around Sharia as-Souq, as well as at the train station.

American Express (Map p302; ☎ 230 6983; Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 9am-5pm Sun-Thu, to 2pm Fri & Sat)

Bank of Alexandria (Map p304; Corniche an-Nil) Accepts Eurocheques.

Banque du Caire (Map p304; Corniche an-Nil) Has an ATM and will issue cash advances on both Visa and MasterCard.

Banque Misr (Map p304; Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 8am-3pm & 5-8pm) ATM and foreign-exchange booth next to main building.

Thomas Cook (Map p304; ☎ 230 4011; Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 8am-2pm & 5-9pm)

Post

Branch post office (Map p304; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu) Opposite the Victoria Hotel.

Main post office (Map p304; Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu)

Telephone

There are card phones along the Corniche and at the train station.

Telephone centrale (Map p302; Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 24hr)

Tourist Information

Tourist office (Map p304; ☎ 231 2811, 010 576 7594; Midan al-Mahatta; ☎ 8am-3pm & 7-9pm Sat-Thu, 9am-3pm & 6-8pm Fri) For many years this office next to the train station was one of the most efficient tourist offices in Egypt. Hakeem Hussein is now in charge and, although he is knowledgeable and still helpful, there have been complaints from readers about the fact that there are no longer fixed prices for felucca trips.

Travco (Map p304; ☎ 231 6393, fax 231 5960; www.travco.com; 83 Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 9am-5pm, Mon-Sat)

Visa Extensions

Passport office (Map p304; ☎ 231 2238; Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 8.30am-1pm Sat-Thu) For visa extensions go to this office, at the southern end of the Corniche.

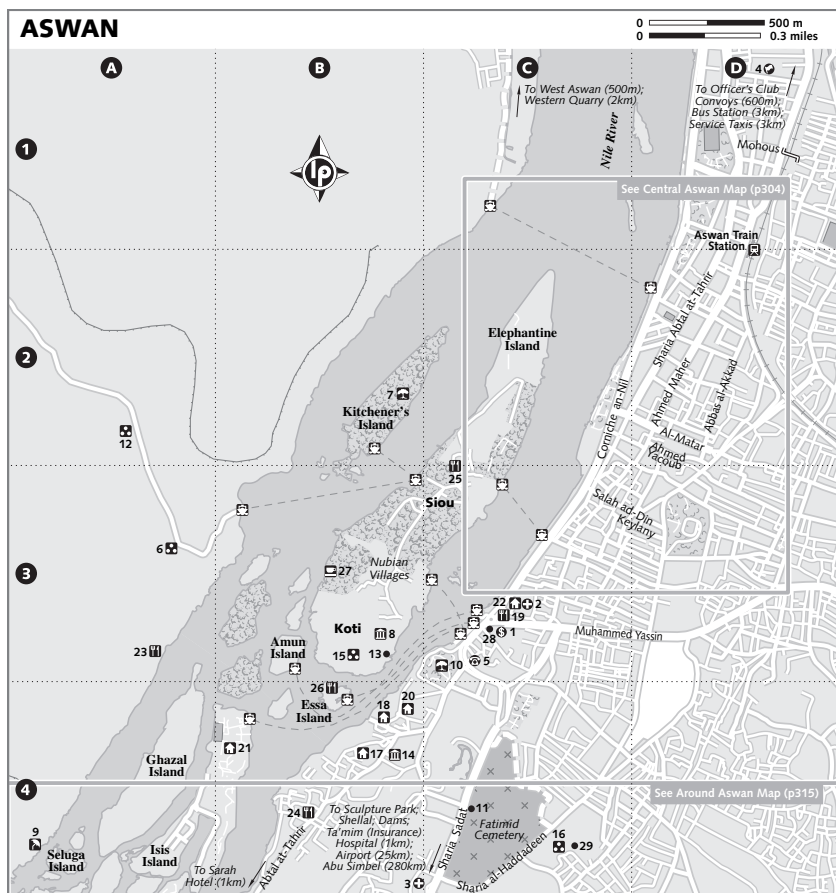
SIGHTS

Aswan's sights are spread out, mostly to the south and west of the town. The souq cuts right through the centre of town, parallel to the Nile. The Nubia Museum is within walking distance, just, but all other sites require transport. The sites on the islands and on the west bank involve a short boat trip.

The Town & East Bank

Starting from the southern end, **Sharia as-Souq** appears very much like the tourist bazaars all over Egypt, with persistent traders trying to lure passers-by into their shops to buy T-shirts, perfume, spices, beaded *galabiyas* (men's full-length robes) and roughly carved copies of Pharaonic statues. But a closer look down side alleys and walking further north reveals more exotic elements, hinting at the markets south in Sudan and Africa. Here traders sell Nubian talisman for good luck, colourful Nubian baskets and scull caps, Sudanese swords, African masques, and enormous stuffed crocodiles and desert creatures. This is also very much a living market, where Nubians from Elephantine Island and around Aswan shop for food and live produce, including fruit, vegetables, chickens and pigeons. Aswan is famous for the quality of its peanuts (*fuul sudan*), henna powder (sold in different qualities) and dried hibiscus flowers, used to make the much-loved local drink *karkadai*. The pace is slow, particularly in the late afternoon, the air has a slight whiff of sandalwood and, as in ancient times, you may feel that Aswan is the gateway to Africa.

Walking along the Corniche and watching the sunset over the islands and the desert on the other side of the Nile is a favourite pastime in Aswan. The view from riverside café-terraces may be blocked by cruise boats, but plans are underway to relocate them all to a dock that is under construction on the northern end of town; for now the best place to watch the sunset is from the Old Cataract Hotel (Map p302; for nonresidents the minimum charge per person is E£85, which can be



spent anywhere except on the main terrace of the hotel, see p311) or next door at the peaceful **Ferial Gardens** (Map p302; admission EE5).

NUBIA MUSEUM

The **Nubia Museum** (Map p302; ☎ 231 9111; Sharia Abat al-Tahrir; adult/student EE40/20; 🕒 9am-1pm & 5-9pm) is a showcase of the history, art and culture of Nubia and is a real treat. Established in 1997, in cooperation with Unesco, the museum is a reminder of the history and culture of the Nubians, much of which was lost when Lake Nasser flooded their land after the building of the dams (see p320). Exhibits are beautifully displayed in huge halls, where clearly written explanations take you from 4500 BC through to the present

day. As it is not on the tour-group circuit, the museum is little visited.

At the entrance to the main exhibition hall is a model of the Nile Valley and the main temple sites. The exhibits start with prehistoric artefacts and objects from the Kingdom of Kush and Meroe. Coptic and Islamic art displays lead to a description of the massive Unesco project to move Nubia's most important historic monuments away from the rising waters of Lake Nasser, following the building of the Aswan High Dam. Among museum highlights are 6000-year-old painted pottery bowls and an impressive quartzite statue of a 25th-dynasty priest of Amun in Thebes with distinct Kushite (Upper Nubian) features. The stunning horse

INFORMATION		Monastery of St Simeon.....	12 A2	EATING 🍴	
American Express.....	1 C3	Nilometer.....	13 B3	1902 Restaurant.....	(see 20)
German Hospital.....	2 C3	Nubia Museum.....	14 B4	Egypt Free Shop.....	22 C3
Mubarak Military Hospital.....	3 B4	Temple of Khnum & Ruins of Abu.....	15 B3	Nubian Beach.....	23 A3
Sudanese Consulate.....	4 D1	Unfinished Obelisk.....	16 C4	Nubian House.....	24 B4
Telephone Centrale.....	5 C3			Nubian House.....	25 C3
				Nubian Restaurant.....	26 B4
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		SLEEPING 🛏		DRINKING ☕	
Aga Khan Mausoleum.....	6 A3	Basma Hotel.....	17 B4	Nubian Café.....	27 B3
Aswan Botanical Gardens.....	7 B2	New Cataract Hotel.....	18 B4		
Aswan Museum.....	8 B3	Nile Hotel.....	19 C3	TRANSPORT	
Beach for Swimming.....	9 A4	Old Cataract Hotel.....	20 B4	Egypt Air.....	28 C3
Ferial Gardens.....	10 C3	Pyramisa Isis Island Resort & Spa.....	21 B4	Gathering Point for Police Convoy.....	29 C4
Main Entrance to the Fatimid Cemetery.....	11 C4				

armour found in tombs from the Ballana Period (5th to 7th century BC) shows the sophistication of artisanship during this brief ascendancy. A fascinating display traces the development of irrigation along the Nile River, from the earliest attempts to control the flow of the river, right up to the building of the old Aswan Dam. A model of a Nubian house, complete with old furniture and mannequins wearing traditional silver jewellery, attempts to portray the folk culture of modern Nubia.

All this is housed in a well-designed modern building, loosely based on traditional Nubian architecture. In the museum garden there is a reconstructed Nubian house (which you can't enter, unfortunately) and a small 'cave' with prehistoric petroglyphs, which show giraffes and other wild animals once indigenous to the region. The site also incorporates an 11th-century Fatimid tomb, as well as a number of other tombs of sheikhs.

The museum entrance is about a five-minute walk from the EgyptAir office on Corniche an-Nil.

FATIMID CEMETERY

Behind the Nubia Museum is this vast **cemeter**y (Map p302), a collection of low mud-brick buildings with domed roofs. Although most tombs are modern, some of the mausolea clustered towards the back of the cemetery go back to the Tulunid period (9th century). The old tombs are in bad shape and when the original marble inscriptions fell off after a freak late-19th-century rainstorm, they were taken to Cairo without anyone recording which tomb they had come from. As a result, the dates and names of tomb owners have been lost forever. The tombs are covered with domes that are built on a drum with corners sticking out like horns,

a feature unique to southern Egypt. Some domes near the outer edges of the cemetery are decorated with flags and are in much better condition than the other ones. These belong to local saints and you may see Aswanis circumambulating a tomb, praying for the saint's intercession.

The municipality of Aswan has fenced off the Fatimid Cemetery. Enter from the main gate, a 10-minute walk from the Corniche along the road to the airport, and walk right through the cemetery to join the road to the Unfinished Obelisk; just aim for the four-storey building facing the back of the cemetery. The site's caretaker will often accompany you and show you the best-preserved tombs, for which he should be given a baksheesh of a few pounds.

UNFINISHED OBELISK

Aswan was the source of Egypt's finest granite, the hard stone ancient Egyptians used for statues and to embellish temples and pyramids.

In the **Northern Quarries** (Map p315; adult/student E£25/15; ☎ 7am-4pm Oct-May, 8am-6pm Jun-Sep), about 1.5km from town opposite the Fatimid Cemetery, is a huge discarded **obelisk**. Three sides of the shaft, which is nearly 42m long, were completed except for the inscriptions. At 1168 tonnes, the completed obelisk would have been the single heaviest piece of stone the Egyptians ever fashioned. However, a flaw appeared in the rock at a late stage in the process. So it lies where the disappointed stonemasons abandoned it, still partly attached to the parent rock, with no indication of what it was intended for.

Upon entering the quarry, steps lead down from the surrounding ramp into the pit of the obelisk where there are ancient pictographs of dolphins and ostriches or flamingos,



thought to have been painted by workers at the quarry.

No service taxis run past the site, but you can get one to the junction on Sharia al-Haddadeen and then walk (about 10 minutes). Private taxis will charge about E£12. You can also walk through Fatimid Cemetery to get to it.

SCULPTURE PARK

The **Sculpture Park** (Map p315) near the Southern Quarries houses the sculptures made by artists from around the world, during the International Sculpture Symposium, held each spring at the Basma Hotel.

Sculpture aficionados can get here, taking the road to Shellal, and instead of turning

right towards the ferry to Philae, taking the road up the hill. Continue until you reach the top; on the left is the quarry, on the right the sculptures. No service taxis come to the Sculpture Park, so you will have to organise a private taxi. You should expect to pay about ££20.

The River

ELEPHANTINE ISLAND

Aswan's earliest settlement lies opposite the town centre, just north of the First Cataract. **Elephantine Island** (Map p302) is the site of ancient **Abu** (meaning both elephant and ivory in ancient Egyptian), both names a reminder of the important role the island once played in the ivory trade. At the beginning of the 1st dynasty (about 3000 BC) a fortress was built on the island to establish Egypt's southern frontier. Abu soon became an important customs point and trading centre. It remained strategically significant throughout the Pharaonic period as a departure point for the military and commercial expeditions into Nubia and the south. During the 6th dynasty (2345–2181 BC) Abu gained its strength as a political and economics centre and, despite occasional ups and downs, the island retained its importance until the Graeco-Roman period.

As well as being a thriving settlement, Elephantine was the main cult centre of the ram-headed god Khnum (at first the god of the inundation, and from the 18th dynasty worshipped as the creator of humankind on his potter's wheel), Satet (Khnum's wife, and guardian of the southern frontier) and their daughter Anket. Each year the rushing of the waters of the flood were first heard here on Elephantine. Over time religious complexes took over more and more of the island, so residential areas moved either further north on the island or to the east bank. The temple town of Abu received its *coup de grâce* in the 4th century AD, when Christianity was established as the imperial Roman religion. From then on, worship of the ancient gods was gradually abandoned and defensive fortifications were moved to the east bank, today's city of Aswan.

The extensive ruins of Abu take up the southern end of the island. The northern tip is dominated by the deluxe and architecturally insensitive Mövenpick Resort Aswan; rumour has it that the ugly tower, intended

to hold a panoramic restaurant, may soon be demolished.

Nubian Villages

Sandwiched between the ruins of Abu and the Mövenpick are two colourful Nubian villages, **Siou** and **Koti**. Strolling through their shady alleys and gardens is a wonderful way to experience life on modern Elephantine. A north–south path across the middle of the island links the two villages and about halfway along is the Nubian Café, with a shady garden beside a traditional Nubian house. The wonderful Hamdi, who often hangs out here, loves to tell people about his culture. Beware that several readers have warned about locals pretending to be Hamdi and trying to sell excursions or souvenirs. Some of these people have turned aggressive when visitors declined their services.

Close to the wall separating the Mövenpick from Siou village is Nubian House, where the owner serves tea, sells Nubian handicrafts, and can arrange live music and dancing or henna 'tattoos' (see boxed text, p306) with local women. Western women should be respectful of local tradition and wear modest clothes.

Aswan Museum & the Ruins of Abu

The ruins of the original town of Abu and the fascinating **Aswan Museum** (Map p302; adult/student ££25/15; ☎ 8am–5pm Oct–Apr, 8.30am–6pm May–Sep) lie at the southern end of Elephantine. The older part of the museum is housed in the villa of Sir William Willcocks, architect of the old Aswan Dam. Built in 1898, it became a museum in 1912. The newer extension was added in 1998.

The main part of the museum houses a dusty collection of antiquities discovered in Aswan and Nubia, but most of the Nubian artefacts rescued from the temples flooded by Lake Nasser were moved to the Nubia Museum. The modern annexe, however, makes up with a delightful collection of objects, from weapons, pottery and utensils to statues, encased mummies and sarcophagi from predynastic to late Roman times, found in the excavations on Elephantine. The well-displayed objects, with excellent labels in English and Arabic, are organised in separate glass cases, each explaining a particular facet of life on the island in ancient times: death, trade, religion, weaving, hunting, farming, cooking and so on. At the right of the main

HENNA TATTOOS

Henna is the natural dye derived from the leaves of the *Lawsonia inermis* shrub, grown in southern Egypt and Nubia for millennia – traces of it have even been found on the nails of mummified pharaohs.

Like their ancestors, Nubian women use henna powder for their hair and also to decorate hands and feet prior to getting married. The intricate red-brown designs adorn the skin for a fortnight or so before fading away.

Women visitors will be offered henna ‘tattoos’ on their hands (or feet or stomachs) at some of the Nubian villages around Aswan or in the souq of Aswan – it looks great and you get to spend time with Nubian women. The Nubian villages on Elephantine Island or in West Aswan, just north of the Tombs of the Nobles, are also good places to try. Check first who will apply them. This is women’s work, but would-be lotharios see this as a great opportunity to get close to a bit of foreign flesh.

Tattoos are traditionally red-brown but many foreigners like black henna, which in effect is natural henna darkened with chemicals, among them the very toxic hair-dye PPD, which is banned in Europe. Avoid black henna at all cost, and visit www.hennapage.com to see the damage the dye can cause, from a light allergic reaction to chemical burns and sometimes even death.

At all these places you’re looking at anywhere between £20 and £70 per tattoo, depending on the size and intricacy of the design.

entrance, in a room by itself, lies the sarcophagus and mummy of a sacred ram, the animal associated with Khnum.

A path through the garden behind the museum leads to the evocative **ruins of ancient Abu**. Swiss and German teams, excavating here since the early 20th century, have made the site into an outdoor museum. Numbered plaques and reconstructed buildings mark the island’s long history from around 3000 BC to the 14th century AD. The largest structure in the site is the partially reconstructed **Temple of Khnum** (plaque Nos 6, 12 and 13). Built in honour of the God of Inundation during the Old Kingdom, it was added to and used for more than 1500 years before being extensively rebuilt in Ptolemaic times. Other highlights include a small 4th-dynasty **step pyramid**, thought to have been built by Sneferu (2613–2589 BC; father of Khufu of Great Pyramid fame); a tiny **Ptolemaic chapel** (No 15), reconstructed from the Temple of Kalabsha (which is now just south of the High Dam); a reconstructed 18th-dynasty **temple** (No 2), built by Hatshepsut (1473–1458 BC) and dedicated to the goddess Satet; a **cemetery for sacred rams** (No 11), thought to have been the living embodiment of the god Khnum; and the ruins of an **Aramaic Jewish colony** dating from the 5th century BC.

Heavenly portents and priestly prophecies aside, in ancient times only the Nilometer could give a real indication of the likelihood

of a bountiful harvest. When the Nilometer here in the southern frontier town recorded a high water level of the river, it meant a good harvest, which in turn meant more taxes. The **Nilometer of the Temple of Khnum** (No 7) is below the southern balustrade of the Khnum temple. Built in the 26th dynasty, its stone stairs lead down to a small basin for measuring the Nile’s maximum level. Another stairway, with a scale etched into its wall, leads to the water from the basin’s northern end. Descending to the river’s edge from beneath a sycamore tree near the museum is the **Nilometer of the Satet Temple** (No 10). Built in late Ptolemaic or early Roman times and restored in the 19th century, its staircase is roofed over and niches in the walls would have had oil lamps to provide light. If you look hard as you descend to the river, you can see the names of Roman prefects carved into the left-hand wall.

An excellent guide, *Elephantine: The Ancient Town*, produced by the German archaeological mission on Elephantine, explains the long history of Abu and describes in detail the monuments according to their numbered plaques. It is available in English and German at the museum or, when it is open, at the German excavation house, adjacent to the site.

Getting There & Away

For information on ferries to Elephantine Island, see p308.

ASWAN BOTANICAL GARDENS

To the west of Elephantine is the **Aswan Botanical Gardens** (Map p302; admission £E10; ☞ 8am-5pm Oct-Apr, to 6pm May-Sep), still often referred to by its old name, Kitchener's Island. The island was given to Lord Horatio Kitchener in the 1890s when he was commander of the Egyptian army. Indulging his passion for beautiful palms and plants, Kitchener turned the entire island into a stunning botanical garden, importing plants from the Far East, India and parts of Africa. Covering 6.8 hectares, it is filled with birds as well as hundreds of species of flora. The garden may have lost some of its former glory, but its majestic palm trees are still a stunning sight, particularly just before sunset when the light is softer and the scent of sandalwood floats on the breeze. Avoid Friday when the place is invaded by picnicking extended families with stereos.

The island is most easily seen as part of a felucca tour. Alternatively take the northernmost ferry to Elephantine and walk across the village to the other side of the island, where a few little feluccas wait on the island's western edge, to take visitors across. Expect to pay at least £E10 for a one-way trip.

The West Bank

As with the Botanical Gardens, it is easiest to visit the west bank as part of a felucca tour. The longer way is to take a ferry from Elephantine Island across to the landing for the Monastery of St Simeon. To get to the Tombs of the Nobles, there is a public ferry that leaves from a landing north of the Abu Simbel Hotel on the east bank. See p308 for more details.

AGA KHAN MAUSOLEUM

High up on the west bank stands the elegant **Tomb of Mohammed Shah Aga Khan** (closed to the public), the 48th imam (leader) of the Ismaili sect, who died in 1957, and of his wife the Begum, who died in 2000. Aswan was their favourite wintering place, and the family's white villa is in the garden beneath the tomb.

MONASTERY OF ST SIMEON

The fortresslike 7th-century **Monastery of St Simeon** (Map p302; Deir Amba Samaan; adult/student £E20/10; ☞ 8am-4pm Oct-May, 7am-5pm Jun-Sep) was first dedicated to the 4th-century local saint, Anba Hadra, who renounced the world on his wedding day. It was rebuilt in the 10th cen-

tury and dedicated to St Simeon. From here the monks travelled into Nubia, in the hope of converting the Nubians to Christianity, until Salah ad-Din destroyed the monastery in 1173.

Surrounded by desert sands, the monastery was built on two levels – the lower level of stone and the upper level of mud brick – surrounded by 10m-high walls. The basilica has traces of frescoes, and nearby is the chamber where St Simeon prayed with his beard tied to the ceiling in case he fell asleep. The cells with their mastaba beds, once provided accommodation for about 300 resident monks and some 100 pilgrims. The last room on the right still has graffiti from Muslim pilgrims who stayed here en route to Mecca.

To get to the monastery from the boat landing, negotiate with the camel drivers (expect to pay about £E30 per hour; agree in advance how much time you want to spend) or scramble up the desert track (about 25 minutes). Alternatively, you can take the ferry to the Tombs of the Nobles and ride a camel or donkey from there (same price; see p308), but remember to bring water.

TOMBS OF THE NOBLES

The high cliffs opposite Aswan, just north of Kitchener's Island, are honeycombed with the tombs of the governors, the keepers of the Gate of the South, and other dignitaries of ancient Elephantine. Known as the **Tombs of the Nobles** (Map p304; adult/student £E20/10; ☞ 8am-4pm Oct-May, to 5pm Jun-Sep), six are open to the public. The tombs date from the Old and Middle Kingdoms and most follow a simple plan, with an entrance hall, a pillared room and a corridor leading to the burial chamber. A set of stairs cutting diagonally across the hill takes you up to the tombs from the ferry landing.

Tombs of Mekhu & Sabni (Nos 25 & 26)

The adjoining tombs of father and son Mekhu (Tomb No 25) and Sabni (Tomb No 26), both governors, date from the long reign of 6th-dynasty Pharaoh Pepi II (2278–2184 BC). The reliefs in Sabni's tomb record how he led his army into Nubia, to punish the tribe responsible for killing his father during a previous military campaign, and to recover his father's body. Upon his return, Pepi II sent him his own royal embalmers and professional mourners, to show the importance accorded to the keepers of the

southern frontier. Several reliefs in Sabni's tomb retain their original colours, and there are some lovely hunting and fishing scenes depicting him with his daughters in the pillared hall.

Tomb of Sarenput II (No 31)

Sarenput was the local governor and overseer of the priesthood of Satet and Khnum under 12th-dynasty Pharaoh Amenemhat II (1922–1878 BC). One of the most beautiful and best-preserved tombs, its colours are still vivid. A six-pillared entrance chamber leads into a corridor with six niches holding statues of Sarenput. The burial chamber has four columns and a niche with wall paintings showing Sarenput with his wife (on the right) and his mother (on the left), as well as hunting and fishing scenes.

Tomb of Harkhuf (No 34)

The tomb of Harkhuf, governor of the south during the reign of Pharaoh Pepi II, is hardly decorated, except for remarkable hieroglyphic texts about his three trading expeditions into central Africa, trading of the entrance. Included here is Pepi II, then only a boy of eight, advising Harkhuf to take extra care of the 'dancing pygmy' he had obtained on his travels, as the pharaoh was very keen to see him in Memphis. 'My majesty desires to see this pygmy more than the gifts of Sinai or of Punt,' Harkhuf writes. Look carefully to see the tiny hieroglyph figure of the pygmy several times in the text.

Tomb of Hekaib (Pepinakht; No 35)

Hekaib, also known as Pepinakht, was overseer of foreign soldiers during the reign of Pharaoh Pepi II. He was sent to quell rebellions in both Nubia and Palestine, and was even deified after his death as is revealed by the small shrine of Hekaib built on Elephantine Island during the Middle Kingdom (c 1900 BC). There are fine reliefs showing fighting bulls and hunting scenes.

Tomb of Sarenput I (No 36)

The court of the tomb of Sarenput I, grandfather of Sarenput II and governor during the 12th-dynasty reign of Pharaoh Sesostri I (1965–1920 BC), has the remains of six pillars, decorated with reliefs. On either side

of the entrance Sarenput is shown being followed by his dogs and sandal-bearer, his flower-bearing harem, his wife and his three sons.

KUBBET AL-HAWA

On the hilltop above the Tombs of the Nobles lies this small **tomb** (Map p304), constructed for a local sheikh. The steep climb up is rewarded with stunning views of the Nile and the surrounding area.

WESTERN QUARRY

Isolated in the desert to the west of the Tomb of the Nobles is the ancient **Western Quarry** (Gebel Simaan), where stone for many ancient monuments – possibly including the Colossi of Memnon (see p257) – was quarried. The large **unfinished obelisk**, made for Pharaoh Seti I (1294–1279 BC), was decorated on three sides of its apex before it was abandoned. Nearby the ancient quarry face and marks are clearly visible, along with the tracks on which the huge blocks were dragged down to the Nile.

Guides to the quarry can be found at the ferry landing, opposite the Tombs of the Nobles. Expect to pay at least E£50 to E£80, after bargaining, for the camel ride, half an hour each way. Take plenty of water, and keep an eye out for snakes.

ACTIVITIES

Feluccas & Ferries

The Nile looks fabulous and magical at Aswan, and few things are more relaxing than hiring a felucca (traditional canvas-sailed boat) before sunset and sailing between the islands, the desert and the huge black boulders, listening to the flapping of the sail and to Nubian boys singing from their tiny dugouts. On days when cruise boats dock together in town, hundreds of feluccas circle the islands, a good time to take a felucca a bit further out towards Seheyl Island (p315). The trustworthy **Gelal** (☎ 012 415 4902), who hangs out near Panorama Restaurant near the ferry landing, offers hassle-free tours on his family's feluccas at good-value fixed prices. He is from Seheyl Island and can also arrange a visit of the island and lunch (E£25) in his house, as well as a swim on a safe beach (see opposite).

When walking along the Nile, it's hard to avoid felucca touts any time of the day. According to the tourist office the going rate for hiring a felucca for up to eight people is

around ££30 per hour for the boat. But if business is good, prices go up. A three- or four-hour tour costs at least ££75 to ££90. A two- to three-hour trip down to Seheyl Island costs about ££75.

The public ferry (££1) runs to Elephantine Island, departing from either the landing opposite the telephone centrale (Map p302) or the one across from Thomas Cook (Map p304). Another ferry (££1) leaves from a landing (Map p304) north of the Abu Simbel Hotel to the landing for Tombs of the Nobles on the west bank. When the river is low the ferry leaves from just north of the tourist-police station (Map p304).

For details on taking an overnight felucca trip down the Nile, see the boxed text, p85.

Swimming

Aswan is a hot place, and often the only way to cool down, apart from hiding in your air-conditioned room, is to swim. Joining the local kids splashing about in the Nile is not a good idea (see Schistosomiasis, p538). Schistosomiasis can only be caught in stagnant water; boatmen know where the current is strong enough (but not too strong), for it to be safe, among them a beach on the west bank opposite Seluga Island (Map p302). To get there rent a motor boat (per person about ££40 and ££20 extra for lunch if you want to spend the day). Some hotels have swimming pools open to the public, generally from 9am to sunset. The cheapest by far is the Cleopatra Hotel (p310), which costs ££10, but the pool is small and overlooked by other buildings. The Basma Hotel (p311) has a large pool that non-guests can use for ££30, while the Mövenpick (p311) and Isis Hotel (p310) charge ££60.

TOURS

Small hotels and travel agencies arrange day tours of the area's major sights. Half-day guided tours usually include the Temple of Isis at Philae, the Unfinished Obelisk and the High Dam, and start at ££275 (per person with three to five people) with Amex or Thomas Cook, including admission to all sites. Some budget hotels offer cheaper tours but are not licensed to guide groups. Travel agencies will also arrange felucca trips to Elephantine and Kitchener's Islands for about ££65 to ££100 per person, based on a group of three to five people, but it is cheaper to deal directly with the boatmen.

All travel agencies and most hotels in Aswan offer trips to Abu Simbel, but watch out for huge price differences. Some cheaper tours may not include admission fees, and buses may not have air-con, so it pays to ask a few questions before setting off through the desert, particularly in summer. Most larger travel agencies in Aswan use air-con coaches and minibuses to Abu Simbel. Try Thomas Cook, Amex, Travco or one of the other reputable agencies in town. Their bus trips will be a lot more expensive, but definitely more comfortable. Thomas Cook charges about US\$115 per person, including a seat in an air-con minibus, admission fees and guide, and US\$260 by air, including transfers, fees and guide. By contrast, budget hotels offer tours for about ££120 to ££150, often stopping off at the Unfinished Obelisk and Temple of Isis on the return trip. Again, you get no extras and have no protection in case of problems. For more information about getting to Abu Simbel, see p326.

SLEEPING

Most visitors to Aswan stay on their cruise boats, so the hotel scene has changed little in the last few years. There are few good mid-range options and many of the longstanding places are only slowly making well overdue improvements to décor and service. Prices vary greatly depending on the season. The high season officially extends from October through to April, but it peaks in December and January. In the low season, and even until early November, you'll have no trouble finding a room. We have tried to list high-season rates here. All prices include breakfast and taxes unless otherwise noted.

Budget

HOSTELS

International Youth Hostel (Map p304; ☎/fax 230 2313; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; dm members/nonmembers ££8.55/10.25, r ££15) Don't be confused with the governorate-run hostel next door, for Egyptians only. The International Youth Hostel has seen much better days and the (clean) shared bathrooms show signs of age, but it's a good deal if you're on a tight budget.

HOTELS

Hotel touts at the train station try to convince tired travellers that the hotel they have booked is now closed so that they can take them to

another hotel and collect their commission. Ignoring them is the thing to do, otherwise it usually ends up costing you more.

Noorhan Hotel (Map p304; ☎ 231 6069; off Sharia as-Souq; s/d ££20/25; 📺) A perennial travellers' haunt, the Noorhan has OK rooms with private bathrooms, and some have air-con. Internet access (per hour ££10) is available, and Stellas are served (££9). Readers have complained about aggressive staff tactics for promoting tours.

Yassin Hotel (Map p304; ☎ 231 7109; off Sharia as-Souq; s/d ££20/25; 📺) Same story as the neighbouring Noorhan Hotel, with staff trying to push tours at all costs, but the rooms are clean and some have private bathrooms. It's a good deal if other cheap options are full.

Nubian Oasis Hotel (Map p304; ☎ 231 2126; Nubian Oasis_Hotel_Aswan@hotmail.com; 234 Sharia as-Souq; s/d ££25/30; 📺 📺) Popular with backpackers. The rooms are clean enough, with private bathrooms, and the hotel has a large lounge area and a pleasant roof garden where cool Stellas (££9) are served. The staff is renowned to be pushy, as they make their money from selling tours.

Abu-Schleeb Hotel (Map p304; ☎ 230 3051; off Sharia Abbas Farid; s/d/tr ££35/40/45; 📺) These small but clean rooms, in a modern, characterless building, offer good value, all with private bathrooms and hot water. Corner rooms have balconies, and there is a dusty restaurant on the ground floor with very sleepy staff.

Hathic Hotel (Map p304; ☎ 231 4580; fax 303 462; Corniche an-Nil; s/d ££40/60; 📺) The 36 spotless rooms vary in size and some are gloomy, but all have private bathrooms and most have air-con (which is controlled at reception), all in all offering good value for money. The rooftop terrace has a small swimming pool with a few poolside chairs and spectacular Nile views.

Memnon Hotel (Map p304; ☎/fax 230 0483; Corniche an-Nil; s/d ££45/65; 📺 📺) The Memnon has been around for a few years and it shows, but the clean, good-sized rooms have great Nile views. The rooftop has a small not very attractive pool and no shade. The shabby hotel entrance is easily missed, on a dusty street off the Corniche, south of the Aswan Moon restaurant.

Nuba Nile Hotel (Map p304; ☎ 231 3267; nubanil_hotel@hotmail.com; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; s/d ££60/75; 📺) If the Keylany is full, this friendly family-run hotel is the next best budget option, with clean, comfortable rooms, conveniently located just

north of the square in front of the train station and beside a popular *ahwa* and internet café. Check the room before you agree, as they vary considerably: some are tiny, others have no windows, but all have private bathrooms, and most have air-con.

Philae Hotel (Map p304; ☎ 231 2090; fax 232 4089; Corniche an-Nil; s/d Nile view ££70/90, rear view ££60/75; 📺) Rooms at this well-established hotel have recently been renovated, with freshly painted walls, tiled floors and proper bathrooms; however, the rooms on the lower floors are very noisy.

our pick Keylany Hotel (Map p304; ☎ 231 7332; www.keylanyhotel.com; 25 Sharia Keylany; s/d/tr ££60/75/90; 📺 📺) Aswan's best budget hotel has simple but comfortable rooms, furnished with pine furniture and with spotless bathrooms with proper showers and hot water. The management and staff are friendly and endlessly helpful. The roof terrace has no Nile view but there is a burlap sunshade and furniture made from palm fronds, and it is a great place to hang out. Good internet place downstairs.

Happi Hotel (Map p304; ☎ 231 4115; fax 230 7572; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; s/d ££65/90; 📺 📺) Turn a blind eye to the gloomy décor and threadbare carpets, and the Happi is not a bad place to stay. The staff can be unresponsive, but the rooms are clean and have decent-sized private bathrooms. Some have Nile views, too. The owner also runs the Cleopatra Hotel (below), so guests can use the Cleopatra's pool at a discounted price.

Ramsis Hotel (Map p304; ☎ 230 4000; fax 231 5701; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; s/d ££65/100; 📺) A pleasant, conveniently located high-rise hotel, with little character but comfortable rooms with a shower, toilet, TV and minifridge, and some have Nile views. Service is quite slow, but it's good value for the price.

Orchida St George (Map p304; ☎ 231 5997; orchida_hotel@hotmail.com; Sharia Muhammed Khalid; s/d ££80/100; 📺 📺) Friendly three-star hotel with clean rooms, all equipped with comfortable beds, spotless bathrooms, fridge and satellite TV. The décor is tacky, and the room sizes differ considerably, so check before you commit.

Midrange

Aswan has only a small selection of midrange hotels. There's not much to distinguish those at the bottom end of the scale from the better budget places, so if money's tight look carefully before making a choice.

Al-Amir Hotel (Map p304; ☎ 231 4732; fax 230 4411; Sharia Abbas Farid; s/d E90/120; 🍷) A street back from the Corniche, this three-star hotel claims to have Nile views (apparent only if you strain your neck). The kitsch décor sets the tone and betrays a connection with the Gulf (Saudi emblems emblazon the stationery and brochures). The 28 rooms, all with private bathrooms and satellite TV, are showing their age. Consider only if others are full.

Nile Hotel (Map p302; ☎ 231 4222; www.nilehotel-aswan.com; Corniche an-Nil; s/d/tr E£127/158/190; 🍷 📺) A very welcome new hotel in this price range offering 30 well-appointed rooms with spotless private bathrooms, satellite TV and minibar, all with a window or balcony overlooking the Nile. The staff speak English and are very friendly and helpful. There is a restaurant, a small library with foreign novels and books about Egypt, and a business centre. Recommended.

Sarah Hotel (Map p315; ☎ 232 7234; www.sarahhotel-aswan.com; s/d US\$35/55; 🍷 📺) Built on a clifftop overlooking the Nile about 2km beyond the Nubia Museum, the Sarah is isolated but has fantastic views over the First Cataract and the Western Desert. It's worth putting up with the kitsch pastel décor for the spotlessly clean rooms, with satellite TV, friendly staff and a good-sized pool overlooking the Nile. Corner rooms have huge balconies. The cafeteria is hugely popular with Aswanis. A shuttle bus runs into town hourly. If you want to stay in Aswan for a few days of peace and quiet, the Sarah is a good choice.

Marhaba Palace Hotel (Map p304; ☎ 233 0102; marhabaaswan@yahoo.com; Corniche an-Nil; s/d US\$50/60; 🍷) The Marhaba has small but cosy tastefully decorated rooms, with comfortable beds, sumptuous bathrooms for this price range and satellite TV. Bright and welcoming, it overlooks a park on the Corniche and has two restaurants, friendly staff and a roof terrace with excellent Nile views.

Cleopatra Hotel (Map p304; ☎ 231 4003; fax 231 4002; Sharia as-Souq; s/d US\$48/62; 🍷 📺 📺) Away from the bright lobby, the Cleopatra is dark and gloomy, with 109 rooms filled with battered old furniture, ancient air-con units and unfriendly staff. Somehow it remains full of groups on cut-price package tours, possibly because of its convenient location in the centre of town and a reasonably sized (but overlooked) rooftop pool. It could be much

better; perhaps the opening of the Marhaba Palace will force the management to clean up its act.

Isis Hotel (Map p304; ☎ 232 4744; www.pyramisaegypt.com; Corniche an-Nil; s/d US\$62/74; 🍷 📺) Built right on the riverbank, the Isis Hotel has a prime location in the centre of town. The chalet-style rooms in the garden are clean and comfortable, popular with budget tour groups. The hotel has a reasonably good Italian restaurant and a figure-8-shaped pool beside the Nile.

Top End

Pyramisa Isis Island Resort & Spa (Map p302; ☎ 231 7400; www.pyramisaegypt.com; r garden/Nile view E79/89; 🍷 📺 📺) Imposing four-star resort hotel on its own island (there are regular free shuttle boats to town), with big well-appointed rooms overlooking the Nile or the garden. Popular with tour groups, it has two huge swimming pools and several restaurants, usually with long queues at the enormous buffets. Very friendly staff.

New Cataract Hotel (Map p302; ☎ 231 6002; www.softel.com; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; s/d city view US\$98/138, Nile view US\$108/160; 🍷 📺 📺) If your budget doesn't stretch to the Old Cataract, consider staying at the high-rise modern annexe next door. The rooms could do with an update, but the 1960s décor of the lobby and restaurants is just becoming attractive again, and the Nile-side rooms have stunning views (try to get one on the upper floors). You also get access to the Old Cataract's swimming pool and restaurants.

Basma Hotel (Map p302; ☎ 231 0901; basma@rocketmail.com; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; s/d €110/165; 🍷 📺 📺) Located on the Nile near the Nubia Museum, the Basma has friendly staff, and a large pool and terrace with fantastic Nile views at sunset. The whole place is quite sleepy and would definitely benefit from some updating, but rooms are spacious and comfortable, equipped with fridge and satellite TV. There is an Asian and European restaurant, but the food is mediocre.

our pick Old Cataract Hotel (Map p302; ☎ 231 6000; www.softel.com; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; s/d garden view US\$175/190, r Nile view US\$168-1500; 🍷 📺) The *grande dame* of hotels on the Nile, the Old Cataract brings you back to the days of Agatha Christie, who is said to have written part of her novel *Death on the Nile* here (the hotel featured in the movie). The splendid building, surrounded by well-tended exotic gardens on

a rock above the river, commands fantastic views of the Nile and several islands, the ruins of Abu and the desert behind. The service and food don't live up to the grand architecture and can be disappointing, but the atmosphere and views make a stay unique and worthwhile. Deluxe Nile-view rooms are worth the extra cost, but ask to see several if possible as they vary in size and style. The hotel is worth visiting just to enjoy a cool cocktail or afternoon tea: the old-fashioned veranda is often reserved for guests, but the lower terrace commands the same views. Expect to be charged E£85 (to be offset against your bar tab) for the privilege.

Mövenpick Resort Aswan (Map p304; ☎ 230 3455; www.moenvick-aswan.com; Elephantine Island; 🍷 🍷) Hidden in a large garden, and characterised by an ugly tower, rumoured to be ripe for demolition, the Mövenpick dominates the northern end of Elephantine Island. At the time of writing the hotel was being totally refurbished and, with the Mövenpick's reputation in Egypt, will probably be the best resort-style hotel in town. Guests are transported to and from the town centre by a free ferry. Prices were not available at the time of writing but will be announced when it opens (by the time this book is published).

EATING

Aswan is a sleepy place, and as most tourists eat on board of the cruise boats, the restaurant scene is as stagnant as the hotel scene. Few new ones open and old stalwarts don't close, even if they seem to have few customers. Outside the hotels, few serve alcohol and none accept credit cards.

Restaurants

Emy (Map p304; ☎ 230 4349; Corniche an-Nil; dishes E£8-20) On a double-decked boat moored on the Nile next to the Aswan Moon, this is where the Nubian felucca captains hang out, as it is the only place where cool beers (Sakkara E£9, Stella E£8) are served. The menu includes a selection of salads (E£2.50), Egyptian and international dishes (E£13 to E£18) and excellent fresh juices (E£4.50).

Panorama (Map p304; ☎ 231 6169; Corniche an-Nil; dishes E£8-20) With its quiet waterside location and pleasant terrace, this is a great place to chill out and watch the Nile flow by, while sipping a herbal tea or fresh juice. It also serves simple Egyptian stews cooked in clay pots,

with salad, mezze and rice or chips, or an all-day breakfast.

Al-Masry Restaurant (Map p304; ☎ 230 2576; Sharia al-Matar; meals E£8-30) Popular with meat-eating local families, Al-Masry is famous for its excellent fresh kebabs and *kofta* (mincemeat and spices grilled on a skewer), as well as pigeon and chicken, all served with bread, salad and tahini.

Biti Pizza (Map p304; Midan al-Mahatta; dishes E£12-22; 🍷) Convenient to the train station, Biti (beyti) is a popular air-conditioned restaurant and takeaway that serves adequate Western-style pizzas, but more recommended are the delicious sweet and savoury *fiteer* (flaky Egyptian pizza), including the excellent tuna *fiteer* (E£20) or the fruit-and-nut dessert version (E£18).

Aswan Moon Restaurant (Map p304; ☎ 231 6108; Corniche an-Nil; meals E£12-30) The once-popular hang-out no longer serves alcohol, but it remains a pleasant place for dinner. The menu ranges from basic Egyptian and international dishes, including mezze (E£4 to E£9); pizzas (E£19 to E£25); kebabs (E£25); and our favourite *daoud basha* (meatballs in tomato sauce; E£13), served piping hot in an earthenware dish.

Madena Restaurant (Map p304; Sharia as-Souq; meals E£15-20) Small and unpretentious, this no-frills eatery close to the Cleopatra Hotel serves good, basic Egyptian meals at reasonable prices. A decent *kofta* meal, accompanied by bread, rice, salad and tahini, costs E£22. Vegetarian meals cost E£15.

Nubian House (Map p302; ☎ 232 6226; just off Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir on the Nile; mains E£15-22; 🍷 2pm or 3pm-late) This laid-back Nubian café and restaurant is the place to be at sunset, with spectacular views over the First Cataract. Sit on traditional wooden benches on the huge shady terrace for a mint tea and *sheesha* (water pipe). To get here, follow the road past the Nubia Museum for about 1km (15 minutes' walk) and take a right just past a development of upmarket housing (many still under construction). Or take a taxi after dark.

Chef Khalil (Map p304; ☎ 231 0142; Sharia as-Souq; meals E£25-60) Popular fish restaurant, just along from the train station, serving very fresh fish by the weight, from Lake Nasser and the Red Sea, grilled, baked or fried to your choice and served with salad and rice or French fries. It's a small place, but worth the wait if it's full.

ourpick Nubian Beach (Map p302; West Bank, past the Aga Khan Mausoleum; set menu per person £45) Wonderful Nubian café-restaurant set in a quiet garden on the west bank of the Nile, against the backdrop of a towering sand dune. During the heat of the day or on cold winter nights there is a beautifully painted room indoors. The food is simple but good, and alcohol is served – sometimes with live Nubian music.

Nubian Restaurant (Map p302; ☎ 230 2465; Essa Island; meals £45-70) Sitting on a tiny island south of Elephantine Island, the Nubian Restaurant has quite mediocre Nubian food, but does an after-dinner folkloric show, popular with tour groups. A free boat departs opposite EgyptAir.

1902 Restaurant (Map p302; ☎ 231 6000; Old Cataract Hotel, Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; set menu per person £350) Considered Aswan's finest restaurant, and certainly its most formal, this beautifully restored Moorish-style hall is definitely a treat. Dinner is a set four-course French-influenced menu, with a performance by local musicians. Unfortunately here, too, the food doesn't live up to the grandeur of the surroundings at all. Book ahead to reserve a table.

Quick Eats

Along Sharia as-Souq there are plenty of small restaurants and cafés, good for taking in the lively atmosphere of the souq.

Koshary Aly Baba Restaurant (Map p304; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; dishes £1-15) A clean and popular takeaway-restaurant with good *kushari*, as well as *shwarma* and *kofta*.

Haramain Foul & Ta'amiyya (Map p304; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; dishes £2-6) A tiny takeaway hidden among the low-rise apartment blocks, this is where Aswanis go when they want good *fuul* (fava bean stew) and *ta'amiyya* (fava bean dumplings).

El-Tahrir Pizza (Map p304; Midan al-Mahatta; dishes £8-18) A popular café that serves pizza and *fiteer* at rock-bottom prices. Tea and *sheesha* (£5) are also served.

Self-Catering

The souq is the best place to buy your own food. On Sharia as-Souq, as well as some of the small alleyways, small grocery shops stock canned goods, cheese and UHT milk. Fruit and vegetables are abundant when in season and are best bought in the morning, at their freshest.

Egypt Free Shop (Map p302; ☎ 231 4939; Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 9am-2pm & 6-10pm) The only place to buy liquor, local beer and wine, but you need to show a passport.

ENTERTAINMENT

Palace of Culture (Map p304; ☎ 231 3390; Corniche an-Nil) Between October and February/March, Aswan's folkloric dance troupe sporadically performs Nubian *tahtib* (stick dancing) and songs depicting village life. If tour groups book performances and the troupe is not travelling, it begins its performances at around 9pm Saturday to Thursday. The show lasts about two hours and admission is ££15.

Nubian music is sometimes played at the **Nubian House** (Map p302; ☎ 232 6226; just off Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir on the Nile; ☎ 2pm or 3pm-late) restaurant, although when we visited there was no performance schedules. Call for details. Nubian shows are also performed for tourists at the **Mövenpick Resort Aswan** (Map p304; ☎ 230 3455; www.moevenpick-aswan.com; Elephantine Island) and the **New Cataract Hotel** (Map p302; ☎ 231 6002; www.softel.com; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir).

If you're lucky, you may be invited to a Nubian wedding on a weekend night. Foreign guests are deemed auspicious additions to the ceremony, but don't be surprised if you're asked to pay a ££20 to ££40 'fee' to help defray the huge costs of the band and the food.

Otherwise, strolling along the Corniche, watching the moon rise as you sit at a rooftop terrace or having a cool drink at one of the floating restaurants is about all that most travellers get up to in Aswan at night. The top-end hotels all have discos and nightclubs, but they're fairly empty.

SHOPPING

Aswan's famous souq may be more touristy than it used to be but it's still a good place to pick up souvenirs and crafts. Handmade Nubian skullcaps (about ££10), colourful scarves (££20 to ££30), and traditional baskets and trays (££15 to ££70) in varying sizes are popular. The spices and indigo powder prominently displayed are also good buys, and most of the spice shops sell the dried hibiscus used to make the refreshing drink *karkadai*. However, beware of the safflower that is sold as saffron. Aswan is also famous for the quality of its henna powder and its delicious roasted peanuts. The higher grade of the latter go for ££15 per kilogram.

Hanafi Bazaar (Map p302; ☎ 231 4083; Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 8am-8pm) In a mock Pharaonic temple, this is the oldest, no doubt also the most dusty, and best bazaar in town, with genuine Nubian swords, baskets, amulets, silk kaftans and beads from all over Africa, run by the totally laid-back Hanafi brothers.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Daily flights are available with **EgyptAir** (Map p302; ☎ 231 5000; Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 8am-8pm) from Cairo to Aswan (one-way ££218 to ££681, 1¼ hours). The one-way trip to Luxor is ££127 and takes 30 minutes. There are two flights a day to Abu Simbel, leaving at 6.15am and 9.15am, an hour later in summer. The round-trip ticket costs ££466, including bus transfers between the airport and the temple site.

Boat

For details about the five-star cruise boats and fishing safaris operating on Lake Nasser, see p92. For details on boat transport to Sudan, see p526.

Bus

The bus station is 3.5km north of the train station. It costs about ££10 to get there by taxi, or 50pt by service taxi. Only four foreigners are allowed per bus, and seats cannot be booked in advance, so get to the bus station early to be sure of getting a seat. Take your passport, as there are two checkpoints along the way. The tourist office advises against travelling by bus as it is too much of a hassle.

Upper Egypt Bus Co has three daily buses to Abu Simbel (££20, four hours, departing 8am, 11.30am and 5pm). Buses to Luxor (££20, four to five hours) leave at 6am, 8am, 12.30pm, 2pm, 3.30pm and 5pm, stopping at Kom Ombo (££5, one hour), Edfu (££10, two hours) and Esna (££15, three hours). A direct bus to Cairo (££91, 14 hours) leaves at 3.30pm daily. There are four buses going to Hurghada (££55, eight hours, 6am, 8am, 3.30pm and 5pm), stopping on the way in Luxor, Qena and Safaga. Buses for Marsa Alam (££30, six hours) leave at 6.30am.

Service Taxi

Foreigners are forbidden from taking service taxis and public minibuses. If things change

(check with the tourist office), service taxis leave from the bus station, 3.5km north of the train station.

Train

From the **Aswan Train Station** (Map p304; ☎ 231 4754) a number of daily trains run north to Cairo, but officially foreigners can only buy tickets in the station for three of them (1st/2nd class ££95/48, student 1st/2nd class ££65/38, 14 hours, 6am, 6pm, 8pm). No-one will stop you boarding the two other trains (8am, 4pm), but you have to buy the ticket on the train. All trains heading north stop at Daraw (1st/2nd class ££16/11, 45 minutes), Kom Ombo (££17/13, one hour), Edfu (££22/14, two hours), Esna (££29/17, 2½ hours) and Luxor (££35/21, three hours). Student discounts are available on all of these trains.

Abela Egypt Sleeping Train (☎ 230 2124; www.sleepingtrains.com) has two daily services to Cairo at 5pm and 6.30pm (single/double cabin per person US\$60/80, children aged four to nine years US\$45 including dinner and breakfast, 14 hours). Note that there is no student discount, and tickets must be paid for in US dollars.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

The airport is located 25km southwest of town. A taxi to/from the airport costs about ££30 to ££35.

Bicycle

Aswan is not a great town for cycling. However, there are a few places at the train-station end of Sharia as-Souq where you can hire bicycles for about ££12 a day.

POLICE CONVOYS

Driving north or south means going in a police convoy. Convoys congregate in the parking lot opposite the Unfinished Obelisk. Be there at least 15 minutes in advance. Two convoys head north to Luxor at 8am, one direct and one travelling via Kom Ombo, Edfu and Esna. Another one leaves at 2pm, direct to Luxor. Two convoys travel to Abu Simbel (4am and 11am). The trip to Luxor takes approximately three hours, and it's 3½ hours to Abu Simbel.

Taxi

A taxi tour that includes Philae, the High Dam and the Unfinished Obelisk near the Fatimid Cemetery costs around ££80 to ££100 for five to six people. Taxis can also take you on day trips to Daraw and/or Kom Ombo for about ££150. Remember that you have to join the convoy to do this. A taxi anywhere within the town costs ££5 to ££10.

Service taxis (50pt) run along the major roads in Aswan.

AROUND ASWAN

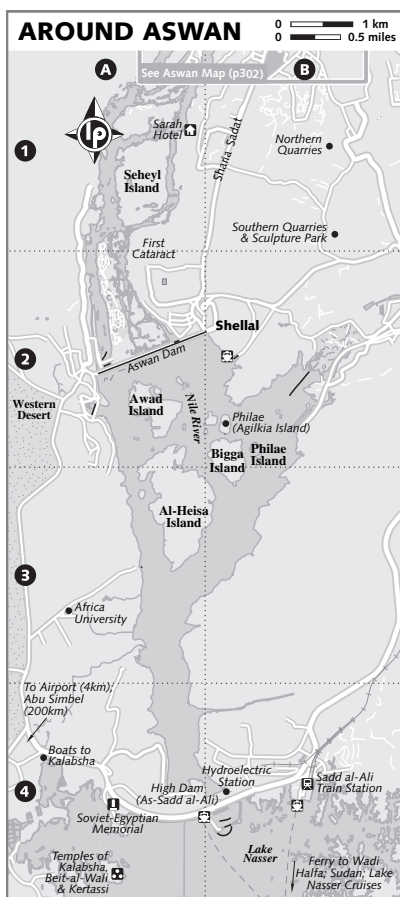
ASWAN DAM

At the end of the 19th century Egypt's fast-growing population made it imperative to cultivate more agricultural land, which would only be possible by regulating the flow of the Nile. The British engineer Sir William Willcocks started construction of the old Aswan Dam in 1898 above the First Cataract. When completed in 1902, it was the largest dam in the world, measuring 2441m across, 50m tall and 30m wide, and was made almost entirely of Aswan granite.

It was raised twice to meet the demand not only to increase the area of cultivable land but also to provide hydroelectric power. With the opening of the High Dam, it now only generates hydroelectricity for a nearby factory producing fertilisers, and otherwise serves as a tourist attraction on the way to the High Dam, 6km upstream. The road to the airport and all trips to Abu Simbel by road include a drive across the Aswan Dam.

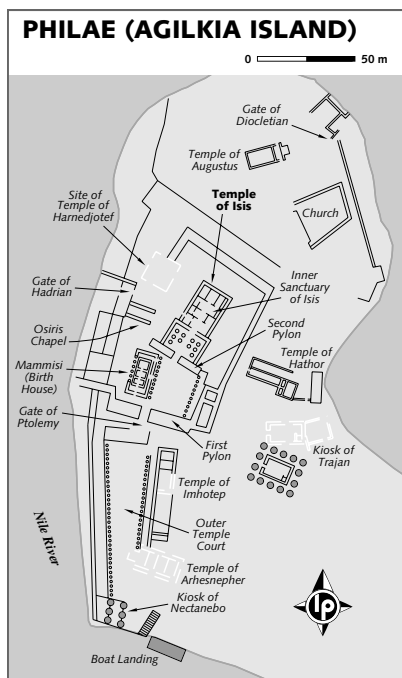
SEHEYL ISLAND

The large island situated just north of the old Aswan Dam, **Seheyil** (adult/child ££65/35; ☎ 7am-4pm Oct-Apr, to 5pm May-Sep) was sacred to the goddess Anukis. Prior to the dam's construction, the Nile would rush noisily through the granite boulders that emerged from the riverbed just south of here, forming the First Cataract, called Shellal by the Egyptians. Herodotus reported that an Egyptian official had told him that this was the source of the Nile, which flowed north and south from there. Now the waters flow slowly and Seheyil makes an ideal destination for a slightly longer felucca trip. On the island's southern tip is



a cliff with more than **200 inscriptions**, most dating to the 18th and 19th dynasties, of princes, generals and other officials who passed by on their journey to Nubia. The most famous is the so-called 'famine stela' from the 3rd dynasty that recounts a terrible seven-year famine during the reign of Zoser (2667–2648 BC), which the pharaoh tried to end by making offerings to the Temple of Khnum at Elephantine.

Next to the inscriptions is a friendly Nubian village with brightly coloured houses. Several houses now welcome visitors, including **Kanzian House** (☎ 012 415 4902; set meal with tea ££30), serving tea and good Nubian lunches as well as selling local crafts. It's a pleasant place to stroll around.



PHILAE (AGILKIA ISLAND)

The romantic aura and the grandeur of the **Temple of Isis** (adult/child EE40/20; ☞ 7am–4pm Oct–May, to 5pm Jun–Sep) on the island of Philae (fee-*leh*) lured pilgrims for thousands of years, and during the 19th century the ruins became one of Egypt's most legendary tourist attractions. After the building of the old Aswan Dam, Philae was swamped for six months of every year by the high waters, allowing travellers to take rowing boats and glide among the partially submerged columns to peer down through the translucent green at the wondrous sanctuaries of the mighty gods below.

After the completion of the High Dam, the temple would have entirely disappeared had Unesco not intervened. Between 1972 and 1980, the massive temple complex was disassembled stone by stone and reconstructed 20m higher on nearby Agilkia Island. Agilkia was then landscaped to resemble the sacred isle of Isis.

Although the cult of Isis at Philae goes back at least to the 7th century BC, the earliest remains on the island date from the reign

of the last native king of Egypt, Nectanebo I (380–362 BC). The most important ruins were begun by Ptolemy II Philadelphus and added to for the next 500 years until the reign of Diocletian (AD 284–305). By Roman times Isis had become the greatest of all the Egyptian gods, worshipped right across the Roman Empire even as far as Britain. Indeed, as late as AD 550, well after Rome and its empire embraced Christianity, Isis was still being worshipped at Philae. Early Christians eventually transformed the main temple's hypostyle hall into a chapel and defaced the pagan reliefs, their inscriptions later vandalised by early Muslims.

Touring the Temple

The boat across to the temple leaves you at the base of the **Kiosk of Nectanebo**, the oldest part of the Philae complex. Heading north, you walk down the **outer temple court**, which has colonnades running along both sides, the western one is the most complete, with windows that originally overlooked the island of Biga. At the end is the entrance of the Temple of Isis, marked by the 18m-high towers of the **first pylon** with reliefs of Ptolemy XII Neos Dionysos smiting enemies.

In the central court of the **Temple of Isis**, the *mammisi* is dedicated to Horus, son of Isis and Osiris. Successive pharaohs reinstated their legitimacy as the mortal descendants of Horus by taking part in rituals celebrating the Isis legend (see the boxed text, p235) and the birth of her son Horus in the marshes.

The **second pylon** leads to a hypostyle hall, with superb column capitals, and beyond lie three vestibules, leading into the **Inner Sanctuary of Isis**. Two granite shrines stood here, one containing a gold statue of Isis and another containing the barque in which the statue travelled, but those were long ago moved to Florence and Paris, and only the stone pedestal for the barque remains, inscribed with the names of Ptolemy III (246–221 BC) and his wife Berenice. A staircase, on the western side, leads up to the **Osiris Chapel**, closed at the time of writing, decorated with scenes of the gods bewailing the dead Osiris, as well as clear images of the Isis Legend and the creation of Horus.

On the northern tip of the island you'll find the **Temple of Augustus** and the **Gate of Diocletian**; east of the second pylon is the de-

lightful **Temple of Hathor** decorated with reliefs of musicians (including an ape playing the lute) and Bes, the god of childbirth. South of this is the elegant, unfinished pavilion by the water's edge, known as the **Kiosk of Trajan** (or 'Pharaoh's Bed'), perhaps the most famous of Philae's monuments and frequently painted by Victorian artists.

Sound-&Light Show

Each evening a **sound-and-light show** (www.sound-light.egypt.com; adult/child ££60/44) is shown at Philae (6.30pm, 7.45pm and 9pm October to May, 8pm, 9.15pm and 10.30pm May to September, and 7.30pm, 8.45pm and 10pm Ramadan). The commentary is cheesy, but wandering through the temple at night is quite delightful. Double-check the schedule at the tourist office.

Day	Show 1	Show 2	Show 3
Monday	English	French	-
Tuesday	French	English	French
Wednesday	French	English	French
Thursday	French	Spanish	Italian
Friday	English	French	-
Saturday	English	Arabic	-
Sunday	German	French	-

Getting There & Away

The boat landing for the Philae complex is at Shellal, south of the old Aswan Dam. The only easy way to get there is by taxi or organised trip (which can be arranged by most travel agencies and major hotels in Aswan). The return taxi fare costs about ££40 without bargaining. Tickets for the return trip are sold at the booth on the landing (££10 per person, small extra baksheesh for the boatman particularly if you want to stay a little longer).

HIGH DAM FACTS

- Length: 3600m
- Width at base: 980m
- Height at highest point: 111m
- Number of workers involved in construction: 35,000
- Number of workers who died during construction: 451

HIGH DAM

Egypt's modern example of construction on a monumental scale, the controversial **Aswan High Dam** (As-Sadd al-Ali) contains 18 times the amount of material used in the Great Pyramid of Khufu and created Lake Nasser, the world's largest artificial lake.

From the 1940s, it was clear that the old Aswan Dam, which only regulated the flow of water, was not big enough to counter the unpredictable annual flooding of the Nile. In 1952, when Gamal Abdel Nasser came to power, plans were drawn up for a new dam, 6km south of the old one, but from the start there were political and engineering difficulties. In 1956, after the World Bank refused the promised loan for the project, Nasser ordered the nationalisation of the Suez Canal, which sparked the Suez Crisis in which France, the UK and Israel invaded the canal region. But Nasser got his way and also won additional funding and expertise from the Soviet Union. Work started in 1960 and was finally completed in 1971.

The dam has brought great benefits to Egypt's farmers, increasing cultivable land by at least 30%. At the same time, the country's power supply has doubled. But there are downsides. The dam has stopped the flow of silt essential to the fertility of the land, and the much higher use of artificial fertilisers has led to increasing salinity of the agricultural areas. The ground water tables have risen, too, and are damaging many monuments close to the Nile. The now perennially full irrigation canals have led to endemic infection with the bilharzia parasite, until recently a huge public health problem.

Most people visit the High Dam, 13km south of Aswan, as part of an organised trip to sights south of Aswan. There is a small pavilion with displays detailing the dimensions and the construction of the dam, and on the western side is a monument honouring Soviet-Egyptian friendship and co-operation. Video cameras and zoom lenses cannot be used, although nobody seems to police this.

Getting There & Away

The quickest way to get to the High Dam is to take a taxi from Aswan (about ££20). Usually it is combined with a trip to the Temple of Kalabsha, which is about 3km from the western end of the dam and is visible from the dam on the western side of Lake Nasser.

FEAST, FAMINE OR WAR

Egypt's fate has always been closely intertwined with the amount of water in the Nile, and although the river flows through many countries, it is Egypt that has gained the most from its beneficence. Ancient Egyptians called their country Kemet (Black Land), after the fertile silt that the Nile's receding waters left in their wake. This annual dumping of a thick layer of dark, wet topsoil allowed ancient Egypt's agricultural system to develop and thrive, leading in turn to an accumulation of wealth and the flourishing of a sophisticated society and culture. When the floods failed and hunger turned to famine, the entire system broke down: consecutive years of inadequate flooding often coincided with the collapse of central authority or invasion by a foreign power.

Because of this dependence on the Nile, the Egyptians developed a highly organised irrigation system to help them deal with its unpredictability. Nilometers, a series of steps against which the rising water would be gauged, were used to measure the level of the flood, which was crucial for predicting soil fertility and crop yields. The Nilometer at Elephantine (see p306), on Egypt's southern frontier, was one of the first to show evidence of rising water in early June. Authorities also used the level of the flood to predict the size of the harvest and therefore to fix the level of taxes farmers should pay.

From the earliest times canals helped extend the reach of the flood plain, and devices were developed to help move water. These began as simple pots. Later, the *shadouf*, a long pole with a 'bucket' at one end and counterbalancing weight at the other, and the *saqia*, an animal-powered water wheel, helped farmers to move greater amounts of water and extend the area of cultivable land.

Since the building of the High Dam, Egypt has been freed from the uncertainties of the Nile's annual flood, but the supply of water is still not entirely within its control. At present Egypt's use of Nile water is governed by a 1959 treaty with Sudan that essentially divides the flow of the river between the two countries. The eight other countries around the Nile basin claim – not without reason – that this is unfair and are clamouring for a more equitable division of this precious resource. An international initiative to help resolve the issue has been underway since 1999 but Egypt, the largest and most powerful – and also the most Nile dependent – of the riparian states has so far blocked any changes to the 1959 treaty and has even threatened war if any country violates its terms.

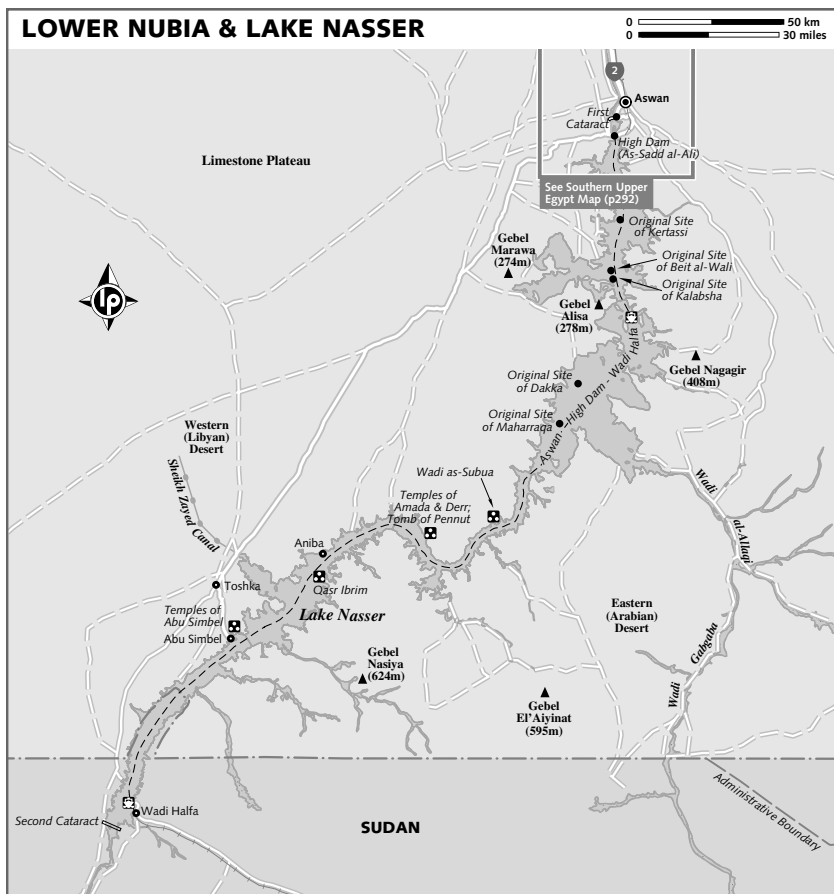
LOWER NUBIA & LAKE NASSER

For thousands of years, the First Cataract marked the border between Egypt and Nubia, the land that stretched from Aswan to Khartoum. The Nile Valley on the Egyptian side was fertile and continuously cultivated, while the banks further south in Nubia were more rugged, with rocky desert cliffs and sand separating small pockets of agricultural land.

The building of the Aswan and High Dams irrevocably changed all that, and much of Nubia disappeared under the waters of Lake Nasser. The landscape now is dominated by the contrast of smooth desert and the calm green-brown water of the lake. Apart from the beauty and the peace of the lake itself, the main attraction

of this region is the temples that were so painstakingly moved above the floodwaters in the 1960s. See the boxed text (p324) for more about this mammoth cultural rescue mission. The area between the First and the Second Cataract is generally known as Lower Nubia (ancient Egyptian Wawat), and further south between the Second and Sixth Cataracts is Upper Nubia (Kush).

To ancient Egyptians, Nubia was Ta-Sety, the Land of Bowmen, after the weapon for which the Nubians were famous. It was a crucial route for the trade with sub-Saharan Africa, and the source of much-needed raw materials, such as copper, ivory, ebony and gold. The modern name is thought to come from the ancient Egyptian word *nbw*, meaning 'gold'. Egypt was always interested in Nubia and its riches, and the two people's history was always connected: when Egypt was strong it dominated Nubia and aggress-



sively exploited its natural resources; when Egypt was weak, the Nubians enjoyed periods of growth and development.

Evidence of 10,000-year-old settlements has been found in northern Nubia. At Nabta Playa, located some 100km west of Abu Simbel, archaeologists have recently discovered the remains of houses, sculpted monoliths and the world's oldest calendar made of small standing stones, dating from around 6000 BC. Until 3500 BC Nubia and Egypt both developed in roughly the same way, domesticating animals, growing crops and gradually adopting permanent settlements. Both people were ethnically linked, but the darker-skinned Nubians had more African features and spoke a Nilo-Saharan

language, while the ancient Egyptian language is Afro-Asiatic.

With the unification of the land north of Aswan around 3100 BC, Egypt started to impose its authority on Nubia. From the beginning of the Old Kingdom, for nearly 5000 years, expeditions were sent to extract the region's considerable mineral wealth. During the First Intermediate Period (2181–2055 BC), central authority in Egypt collapsed, while Nubia became stronger, and Nubian soldiers played an important role in Egypt's civil war. The reunification of Egypt, at the start of the Middle Kingdom, saw Lower Nubia once again annexed and a chain of mud-brick fortresses built at strategic points along the Nile to safeguard trade.

During the New Kingdom, instead of fortresses, the Egyptians built temples in Nubia, dividing the whole of the region into five nomes, ruled on the pharaoh's behalf by his viceroy, who took the title King's Son of Kush. Taking advantage of Egypt's political disunity during the Third Intermediate Period (1069–747 BC), the tables were turned and Nubians extended their authority far to the north, ruling Egypt for a century as the 25th Kushite dynasty (747–656 BC). The 25th dynasty ended with the Assyrian invasion of Egypt, after which Nubian action was guided by its own best interests, sometimes siding with foreign invaders, sometimes with their Egyptian neighbours.

Christianity gradually spread to Nubia after the 5th century AD and lasted long after Islam had spread along the Egyptian Nile. In AD 652 Egypt's new Muslim authorities made a peace treaty with the Christian king of Nubia. That treaty lasted more or less until the 13th century, when Egyptians moved south again: the last Christian king of Nubia was replaced by a Muslim in 1305 and most of the population converted to Islam. In the 19th century Nubia was again important to Egyptian ambitions as the route for its supply of slaves. The rise of the Mahdist state in Sudan at the end of the 19th century led to Nubia being divided for the last time: with the defeat of the Mahdi and his successor, and the establishment of the Anglo-Egyptian government in Sudan in 1899, a border between Egypt and Sudan was established 40km north of Wadi Halfa.

Modern Nubia

Following the completion of the old Aswan Dam in 1902, and again after its height was raised in 1912 and 1934, the water level of the Nile in Lower Nubia gradually rose from 87m to 121m, partially submerging many of the monuments in the area and, by the 1930s, totally flooding a large number of Nubian villages. With their homes flooded, some Nubians moved north where, with government help, they bought land and built villages based on their traditional architecture. Most of the Nubian villages close to Aswan, such as Elephantine, West Aswan and Seheyl, are made up of people who moved at this time. Those who decided to stay in their homeland, built houses on higher land, assuming they would be safe, but they saw their

date plantations, central to their economy, destroyed. This meant that many Nubian men were forced to search for work further north, leaving the women behind to run the communities.

Less than 30 years later, the building of the High Dam forced those who had stayed to move again. In the 1960s, 50,000 Egyptian Nubians were relocated to government-built villages around Kom Ombo, 50km north of Aswan.

Nubian Culture

The Nubians have paid the highest price for Egypt's greater good. They have lost their homes and their homeland, and with a new generation growing up far from the homeland, as Egyptians, or even Europeans and Americans, they are now also gradually losing their distinctive identity and traditions.

What is left of Nubian culture then seems all the more vibrant. Nubian music, famous for its unique sound (see the boxed text, opposite), was popularised in the West by musicians such as Hamza ad-Din, whose oud (lute) melodies are ethereally beautiful. As well as the oud, two basic instruments give the music its distinctive rhythm and harmony: the *douff*, a wide, shallow drum or tabla that musicians hold in their hands; and the *kisir*, a type of stringed instrument.

Less known abroad is Nubia's distinctive architecture, which was the main influence on Egyptian mud-brick architect Hassan Fathy. Traditional Lower Nubian houses are made with mud bricks, but unlike the Upper-Egyptian houses, they often have domed or vaulted ceilings, and further south the houses usually have a flat split-palm roof. They are plastered or whitewashed and covered with decorations, including ceramic plates. The basic forms of these houses can be seen in the Nubian villages around Aswan and in Ballana, near Kom Ombo.

Nubians also have their own marriage customs. Traditionally wedding festivities lasted for up to 15 days, although nowadays they are a three-day affair. On the first night of the festivities, the bride and groom celebrate separately with their respective friends and families. On the second night, the bride takes her party to the groom's home and both groups dance to traditional music until the wee hours. Then the bride returns home and her hands and feet are painted with beauti-

NUBIAN MUSIC

It's one of those strange quirks, but it's almost easier to hear and buy Nubian music in the West than it is in Egypt, apart from in Aswan. Nubian music is very different to the more popular Egyptian music, is rarely heard on national TV and radio, and hard to find in music stores in Cairo. But Nubian artists sell CDs by the rackload in Europe and play to sell-out audiences.

The biggest name is Ali Hassan Kuban. A former tillerman from a small village near Aswan, Kuban grew up playing at weddings and parties and made the leap to a global audience after being invited to perform at a Berlin festival in 1989. Until his death in 2001, he toured all over Europe, as well as in Japan, Canada and the USA. He released several CDs on the German record label **Piranha** (www.piranha.de), including *From Nubia to Cairo* and *Walk Like a Nubian*.

The Nubian sound, unlike Arabic music with its jarring use of quarter tones, is easily accessible, particularly to a Western audience familiar with African music. It is rhythmic, warm and exotic, mixing simple melodies and soulful vocals. This can be heard at its best on a series of CDs by a loose grouping of musicians and vocalists recording under the name Salamat. Look out especially for *Mambo al-Soudani* (again on the Piranha label).

A slightly different facet of Nubian music is represented by Hamza ad-Din, a Nubian composer born in Wadi Halfa in 1929 and widely respected in the West for his semiclassical compositions written for the oud (lute). Inspired by his Sufi beliefs, Ad-Din's work is extremely haunting, especially *Escalay* (The Waterwheel), which you can find in a recording by the composer himself, or there's an excellent version of it by the Kronos Quartet on their CD *Pieces of Africa*.

Other names to look out for are the now-retired Sayyed Gayer, who sings poems and love songs accompanied only by the *douff* (drum), and Ahmed Monieb and Mohammed Hamam.

The best places to pick up CDs of Nubian music are from the music stores in the Aswan souq, where the sales assistants are happy to let you listen to different musicians. To hear authentic live Nubian music, try to get yourself invited to a Nubian wedding in Aswan. You can also head to Eskaleh in Abu Simbel (p325), where musician Fikry Kacheh hosts performances by local musicians.

ful designs in henna. The groom will also have his hands and feet covered in henna but without any design. On the third day, the groom and his party walk slowly to the bride's house in a *zaffer* (procession), singing and dancing the whole way. Traditionally the groom will stay at the bride's house for three days before seeing his family. The couple will then set up home.

Getting There & Away

Although all the sites except Qasr Ibrim have roads leading to them, the only sites foreigners are currently allowed to drive to are Kalabsha, Beit al-Wali and Kertassi. The road to Abu Simbel is open, but foreigners are only allowed to travel in buses or micro-buses in a police convoy. Abu Simbel can be reached by plane from Aswan, Luxor or Cairo. For more details on travelling to Abu Simbel, see p326.

For the moment, the rest of the sites can only be reached by boat, which is in any case the best way to see Lake Nasser's dramatic monuments. See p92 for details.

LAKE NASSER

Looking out over Lake Nasser's vast expanse of deep green-blue water, it's hard to believe that it is human-made. As the world's largest artificial lake, its statistics are staggering: with an area of 5250 sq km, it is 510km long and between 5km and 35km wide. On average it contains some 135 billion cubic metres of water, of which an estimated six billion are lost each year to evaporation. Its maximum capacity is 157 billion cubic metres of water, which was reached in 1996 after heavy rains in Ethiopia, forcing the opening of a special spillway at Toshka, about 30km north of Abu Simbel, the first time it had been opened since the dam was built. The Egyptian government has since embarked on a controversial project to build a new canal and irrigate thousands of acres in what is now the Nubian Desert between Toshka and the New Valley, a project President Mubarak has likened to the Suez Canal and Aswan High Dam in its enormity.

Numbers aside, the contrast between this enormous body of water and the remote desert stretching away on all sides makes Lake

Nasser a place of austere beauty. Because the level of the lake fluctuates it has been difficult to build settlements around its edges. Instead the lake has become a place for migrating birds to rest on their long journeys north and south. Gazelles, foxes and several types of snake (including the deadly horned viper) live on its shores. Many species of fish live in its waters, including the enormous Nile perch. Crocodiles – some reportedly up to 5m long – and monitor lizards also live in the lake's shallows. The main human presence here, apart from the fast-growing population of Abu Simbel town and the few tourists who visit, is limited to the 5000 or so fishermen who spend up to six months at a time in small rowing boats, together catching about 50,000 tonnes of small fish each year.

KALABSHA, BEIT AL-WALI & KERTASSI

As a result of a massive Unesco effort, the temples of **Kalabsha, Beit al-Wali** and **Kertassi** (adult/student ££25/15; ☎ 8am–4pm) were transplanted from a now-submerged site about 50km south of Aswan. The new site is on the west bank of Lake Nasser just south of the High Dam.

The **Temple of Kalabsha**, started in the late Ptolemaic period and completed during the reign of Emperor Augustus (30 BC–AD 14), was dedicated to the Nubian solar god Merwel, known to the Greeks as Mandulis. Later it was used as a church.

In the 1960s and '70s the West German government financed the transfer and reconstruction of the 13,000 blocks of the temple. In thanks, it was presented with the temple's west pylon, now in the Berlin Museum. During the rescue operation, evidence was found of older structures dating from the times of Amenhotep II (1427–1400 BC) and Ptolemy IX.

An impressive stone causeway leads from the lake to the first pylon of the temple, beyond which are the colonnaded court and the eight-columned hypostyle hall. Inscriptions on the walls show various emperors or pharaohs in the presence of gods and goddesses. Just beyond the hall is the sanctuary consisting of three chambers, with stairs leading from one up to the roof, where there are superb views of Lake Nasser and the High Dam, across the capitals of the hall and court. An inner passage, between the temple and the encircling wall, leads to a well-preserved Nilometer.

The **Temple of Beit al-Wali** was rebuilt with assistance from the US government and was placed just northwest of the Temple of Kalabsha. The temple, mostly built by Ramses II, was cut into the rock and fronted by a brick pylon. On the walls of the forecourt, several fine reliefs detail the pharaoh's victory over the Nubians (on the south wall) and wars against the Libyans and Syrians (on the north wall). Ramses is gripping the hair of his enemies prior to smashing their brains while women plead for mercy. The finest scenes are those of Ramses on his throne, receiving the tribute paid by the defeated Nubians, including leopard skins, gold rings, elephant tusks, feathers and exotic animals.

Just north of the Temple of Kalabsha are the scant but picturesque remains of the **Temple of Kertassi**, with two Hathor columns, a massive architrave and four fine papyrus columns.

When the water level is low you can sometimes walk across to the site, otherwise you can find a motorboat on the western side of the High Dam (around ££30 for the return trip and an hour to visit).

WADI AS-SUBUA

The **temples of Wadi as-Subua** (adult/student ££35/20) were moved to this site, about 4km west of the original now-submerged Wadi as-Subua between 1961 and 1965.

Wadi as-Subua means 'Valley of Lions' in Arabic and refers to the avenue of sphinxes that leads to the **Temple of Ramses II**. Yet another monument built during the reign of the energetic pharaoh, the interior of the temple was hewn from the rock and fronted by a stone pylon and colossal statues. Behind the pylon is a court featuring 10 more statues of the pharaoh, beyond which lies a 12-pillared hall and the sanctuary. The central niche was once carved with relief scenes of Ramses making offerings to Amun-Ra and Ra-Horakhty. In Christian times this part was converted into a church, the pagan reliefs plastered over and painted with saints, so that now, with part of the plaster fallen away, Ramses II appears to be adoring St Peter!

About 1km to the north are the remains of the **Temple of Dakka**, begun by the Upper Nubian Pharaoh Arkamani (218–200 BC) using materials from much earlier structures and adapted by the Ptolemies and the Roman Emperor Augustus. Originally situated 40km north of here, it is dedicated to the god of wis-

dom, Thoth, and is notable for its 12m-high pylon, which you can climb for great views of the lake and the surrounding temples.

The **Temple of Maharraqa**, the smallest of the three at this site, originally stood 50km north at the ancient site of Ofendina. Dedicated to Isis and Serapis, the Alexandrian god, its decorations were never finished and all that remains is a small hypostyle hall, where in the northeast corner an usual spiral staircase of masonry leads up to the roof.

AMADA

Situated around 180km south of the High Dam there are two temples and a tomb at **Amada** (adult/student E£35/20).

The **Temple of Amada**, moved about 2.6km from its original location, is the oldest surviving monument on Lake Nasser. It was built jointly by 18th-dynasty pharaohs Tuthmosis III and his son Amenhotep II, with a hypostyle hall added by his successor, Tuthmosis IV (1400–1390 BC). Dedicated, like many temples in Nubia, to the gods Amun-Ra and Ra-Horakhty, it has some of the finest and best-preserved reliefs of any Nubian monument and contains two important historical inscriptions. The first, on a stele at the left (north) side of the entrance, describes the unsuccessful Libyan invasion of Egypt (1209 BC) during Pharaoh Merneptah's reign, and a second stele on the back wall of the sanctuary, describing Amenhotep II's military campaign (1424 BC) in Palestine, both no doubt designed to impress upon the Nubians that political opposition to the powerful Egyptians was useless.

The rock-cut **Temple of Derr**, built by Ramses II, stood on a curve of the Nile. The pylon and court have disappeared, but there are some well-preserved reliefs in the ruined pillared hall, illustrating the Nubian campaign of Ramses II, with the usual killing of his enemies, accompanied by his famous pet lion. Following cleaning, many of the scenes are once again brightly coloured.

Five minutes' walk away is the small rock-cut **Tomb of Pennut**, viceroy of Nubia under Ramses VI (1143–1136 BC), which was originally situated at Aniba, 40km southwest of Amada. This well-preserved Nubian tomb consists of a small offering chapel and a niche at the rear, with reliefs depicting events and personalities from Pennut's life, including him being presented with a gift by Ramses VI.

QASR IBRIM

The only Nubian monument visible on its original site, **Qasr Ibrim** once sat on top of a 70m-high cliff, about 60km north of Abu Simbel, but now has water lapping at its edges.

There is evidence that Ibrim was a garrison town from 1000 BC onwards, and that around 680 BC the 25th-dynasty Pharaoh Taharka (690–664 BC), a Nubian by birth, built a mud-brick temple dedicated to Isis. During Roman times the town was one of the last bastions of paganism, its six temples converting to Christianity two centuries later than the rest of Egypt. It then became one of the main Christian centres in Lower Nubia and held out against the Muslims until the 16th century, when a group of Bosnian mercenaries, part of the Ottoman army, occupied the site. They stayed on and married into the local Nubian community, using part of the cathedral as a mosque.

Among the structural remains, the most impressive is an 8th-century sandstone cathedral built over Taharka's temple. The site is closed to visitors because of ongoing archaeological work.

ABU SIMBEL

☎ 097

The village of Abu Simbel lies 280km south of Aswan and only 40km north of the Sudanese border. The small settlement is laid-back and quiet. So far few tourists linger more than the few hours needed to visit the colossal temples for which it is famous, but things might be about to change. Those interested in the peace and tranquillity of the lake, in seeing the temples without the crowds, in wandering around a small nontouristy Egyptian town without police escort, or in listening to Nubian music might choose to hang around for a few days.

Information

Abu Simbel Hospital (☎ 499 237; main rd)

Ahly Bank (main rd; ☎ 8.30am–2pm & 6–8pm Sun–Thu)

Has an ATM.

Banque du Caire (main rd; ☎ 8.30am–2pm & 6–8pm

Sun–Thu) Has an ATM.

Banque Misr (main rd; ☎ 8.30am–2pm & 6–8pm Sun–

Thu) Has an ATM.

Main post office (☎ 8.30am–2.30pm Sat–Mon) On the road to the temples.

Telephone centrale (☎ 24hr) Off the main road.

Tourist police (☎ 400 277/8) On the road to the temples.

Sights & Activities

Overlooking Lake Nasser, the two **temples of Abu Simbel** (adult/student EE80/40; ☎ 6am-5pm Oct-Apr, to 6pm May-Sep) are reached by road or, if you are on a cruise boat, from one of the jetties leading directly into the fenced temple compound.

GREAT TEMPLE OF RAMSES II

Carved out of the mountain on the west bank of the Nile between 1274 and 1244 BC, Ramses II's imposing temple was as much dedicated to the deified pharaoh himself as to Ra-Horakhty, Amun and Ptah. The four pharaoh's colossal statues fronting the temple are like gigantic sentinels watching over the incoming traffic from the south, undoubtedly designed as a warning of the strength of the pharaoh.

Over the centuries both the Nile and the desert sands imperceptibly shifted, and this temple was lost to the world until 1813, when it was rediscovered by chance by the Swiss explorer Jean Louis Burckhardt. Only one of the heads was completely showing above the sand, the next head was broken off and, of the remaining two, only the crowns could be seen. Enough sand was cleared away in 1817 by Giovanni Belzoni for the temple to be entered.

From the temple's forecourt, a short flight of steps leads up to the terrace in front of the massive rock-cut façade, which is about 30m high and 35m wide. Guarding the entrance, three of the four famous colossal Ramses II statues sit majestically, staring out across the water into eternity – the inner left statue collapsed in antiquity and its upper body still lies on the ground. The statues, more than 20m high, are accompanied by smaller statues of the pharaoh's mother Queen Tuya, his wife Nefertari and some of his favourite children.

Above the entrance, between the central throned colossi, is the figure of the falcon-headed sun god Ra-Horakhty. Unfortunately, the sun god has been subjected to the trials of time and he now lacks part of his leg and foot.

The roof of the large hall is decorated with vultures, which are protective figures symbolising the goddess Nekhbet, and is supported by eight columns, each fronted by an Osiride statue of Ramses II. Reliefs on the walls depict the pharaoh's prowess in battle, trampling over his enemies and slaughtering them in front of the gods. On the north wall is a depiction of the famous Battle of Kadesh (c 1274 BC), now in Syria,

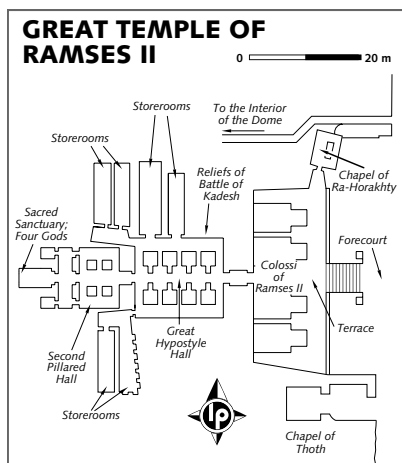
SAVING NUBIA'S MONUMENTS

As the plans for the High Dam were drawn up, worldwide attention focused on the many valuable and irreplaceable ancient monuments doomed by the waters of Lake Nasser. Between 1960 and 1980 the Unesco-sponsored Nubian Rescue Campaign gathered expertise and financing from more than 50 countries, and sent Egyptian and foreign archaeological teams to Nubia. Necropolises were excavated, all portable artefacts and relics were removed to museums and, while some temples disappeared beneath the lake, 14 were salvaged.

Ten of them, including the temple complexes of Philae, Kalabsha and Abu Simbel, were dismantled stone by stone and painstakingly rebuilt on higher ground. Four others were donated to the countries that contributed to the rescue effort, including the splendid Temple of Dendur, now reconstructed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of all was the preservation of the temples at Abu Simbel. Ancient magnificence and skill met with the equally impressive modern technology as, at a cost of about US\$40 million, Egyptian, Italian, Swedish, German and French archaeological teams cut the temples up into more than 2000 huge blocks, weighing from 10 to 40 tonnes each, and reconstructed them inside an artificially built mountain, 210m away from the water and 65m higher than the original site. The temples were carefully oriented to face the original direction, and the landscape of their original environment was re-created on and around the concrete, dome-shaped mountain.

The project took just over four years. The temples of Abu Simbel were officially reopened in 1968 while the sacred site they had occupied for more than 3000 years disappeared beneath Lake Nasser. A plaque to the right of the temple entrance eloquently describes this achievement: 'Through this restoration of the past, we have indeed helped to build the future of mankind'.



where Ramses inspired his demoralised army by his own courage, so that they won the war against the Hittites. The scene is dominated by a famous relief of Ramses in his chariot, shooting arrows at his fleeing enemies. Also visible is the Egyptian camp, walled off by its soldiers' round-topped shields, and the fortified Hittite town, surrounded by the Orontes River.

The next hall, the four-columned vestibule where Ramses and Nefertari are shown in front of the gods and the solar barques, leads to the sacred sanctuary, where Ramses and the triad of gods of the Great Temple sit on their thrones.

The temple is aligned in such a way that on 22 February and 22 October every year, the first rays of the rising sun reach across the Nile, penetrate the temple and move along the hypostyle hall, through the vestibule and into the sanctuary, where they illuminate the somewhat mutilated figures of Ra-Horakhty, Ramses II and Amun. Ptah, to the left, is never illuminated. (Until the temples were moved, this phenomenon happened one day earlier.)

TEMPLE OF HATHOR

Next to the great temple is the much smaller **Temple of Hathor**, with a rock-cut façade fronted by six 10m-high standing statues of Ramses and Nefertari, with some of their many children by their side. Nefertari here wears the costume of the goddess Hathor, and is, unusually, portrayed as the same

height as her husband (instead of coming only up to his knees as most consorts were depicted).

Inside, the six pillars of the hypostyle hall are crowned with capitals in the bovine shape of Hathor. On the walls the queen appears in front of the gods very much equal to Ramses II, and she is seen honouring her husband. The vestibule and adjoining chambers, which have colourful scenes of the goddess and her sacred barque, lead to the sanctuary with a weathered statue of Hathor as a cow emerging from the rock.

SOUND-&LIGHT SHOW

A **sound-and-light show** (www.sound-light.egypt.com; adult/child ££80/43.50) is performed nightly at 7pm and 8pm in winter (October to May) and 8pm and 9pm in summer (May to September). Headphones are provided allowing visitors to listen to the commentary in various languages. While the text is flowery and forgettable, the laser show projected onto the temples is stunning and well worth the detour.

Sleeping & Eating

Few people stay the night in Abu Simbel, but a few hotels allow those looking for ultimate peace and quiet to enjoy their stay.

Abu Simbel Village (☎ 400 092; s/d ££80/110; 🏠) Abu Simbel's cheapest option, the faded Abu Simbel Village has basic vaulted rooms based around a concrete courtyard.

Our pick Eskaleh (Beit an-Nubi; ☎ 012 368 0521; d £40-60; 🏠 🍷) Part Nubian cultural centre with a library dedicated to Nubian history and culture, part small hotel in a traditional Nubian mud-brick house, Eskaleh is definitely the place to stay in town and something of a destination in its own right. The friendly owner Fikry Kachif, a Nubian musician who lived in Abu Simbel before the dam was built, worked for years as a guide on the *Eugénie* (p92), but got tired of travelling and decided to set up shop beside the lake. Comfortable rooms are simply furnished with local furniture, and have fans, air-con and good private bathrooms. Nubian women prepare delicious home-cooked meals (three-course lunch or dinner ££50) with organic produce from Fikry's garden. At night the quiet is absolute, a rare thing on the tourist trail along the Nile. Sometimes Fikry plays with his friends, or he hosts performances of Nubian music and dance.

Seti Abu Simbel (☎ 400 720; www.setifirst.com; s/d US\$130/180; 🍴 📺 📺) Abu Simbel's only five-star hotel has chalet-style rooms overlooking Lake Nasser, all pleasant enough but a bit empty and not worth the prices being charged. The hotel is best booked through the Cairo-based travel agency **Seti First** (☎ 02-736 9820). Its restaurant offers buffet breakfast (E£55), lunch (E£90) and dinner (E£120).

Toya (☎ 012 357 7539; Tariq al-Mabad; breakfast E£8, mains E£15) New place in town serving breakfast for the early arrivals, or simple local cuisine in a lovely garden or madly painted rooms inside. A good place to stop for a drink or to smoke a *sheesha*.

Along Abu Simbel's main road is a line-up of cheap cafés, with the Nubian Oasis and Wadi el-Nil among the most popular.

Getting There & Away

Foreigners travelling from Aswan to Abu Simbel by road must travel in police convoy. The police have deemed taxis off limits to foreigners, so luxury coach or minibus is your only option. Most people opt for a tour and get the admission and guide included.

You can avoid the convoy by taking a bus. Buses from Abu Simbel to Aswan leave at 6am, 9.30am, 1pm and 4pm from the Wadi el-Nil Restaurant on the main road. There is no advanced booking and tickets (E£21) are purchased on board. Note that the official limit is four foreign passengers per bus, although they will generally turn a blind eye to one or two extra.

EgyptAir has flights to Abu Simbel from Aswan; see p314 for flight details.

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'