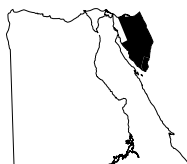


Sinai



Here, not for the first time, I fell deeply in love with the landscape...I longed to reach out and stroke the great gaunt flanks of the mountain falling away into bewildering foot-hills and plains of dazzling sand. Africa and Asia might watch with jealous eyes, I heeded them not.

GW Murray, Dare Me to the Desert (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967)

Sinai, a region of stark beauty, has been a place of refuge, conflict and curiosity for thousands of years. Wedged between Africa and Asia, it is an intercontinental crossroads *par excellence* – prophets, nomads, exiles and conquerors have all left their footprints here.

Sinai is bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the north, and the Gulfs of Aqaba and Suez to the east and west. From the Red Sea coasts, rows of barren, red-brown mountains fill the southern interior. Heading north, the dry desert plains change into many-hued panoramas under the rays of the morning and evening sun. Sinai abounds with contrasts, but never ceases to captivate.

The majority of international tourists head to the glitzy European-style resorts of Sharm el-Sheikh, of which there are literally hundreds vying for beach space. Most are amenable enough places for sea-and-sand holidays, though independent travellers prefer the eternally laid-back town of Dahab. Sinai is also a convenient jumping-off point for southern Jordan, home to the rose-red city of Petra, one of the New Seven Wonders of the World.

Of course, the real charm of Sinai is its stunning desert and marine environments – among the highlights are snorkelling or diving amid teeming coral reefs, close-up encounters with traditional Bedouin culture and following pilgrims' roads to biblical sites. Whatever captures your fancy, however, a visit to Sinai will be one of the most memorable parts of your Egyptian travels.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Gorge yourself on banana pancakes by the oceanside in the backpacker paradise of **Dahab** (p472)
- Dive everything from coral mountains to ghostly shipwrecks in **Ras Mohammed National Park** (p460)
- Climb **Mt Sinai** (p492), the legendary mountain of biblical proportions
- Follow the footsteps of centuries of pilgrims on a visit to **St Katherine's Monastery** (p490)
- Leave Egypt behind (for a few days) on an excursion to the legendary city of **Petra** (p486)



History

Some 40 million years ago the African and Arabian continental plates began to move apart, creating the relatively shallow (95m deep) Gulf of Suez and the much deeper (1800m) Gulf of Aqaba. The Gulf of Aqaba, which varies from 14km to 25km in width, is part of a rift (a crack in the top layer of the earth) that extends 6000km from the Dead Sea, on the border between Israel and Jordan, through the Red Sea, Ethiopia, Kenya, and all the way down to Mozambique in southern Africa.

In Pharaonic times the quarries of Sinai provided great quantities of turquoise, gold and copper. The importance of this 'Land of Turquoise' also made it the goal of empire builders as well as the setting for countless wars. Acting as a link between Asia and Africa, it was of strategic value – many military forces marched along its northern coastline as they travelled to or from what is now known as Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

For many people, Sinai is first and foremost the 'great and terrible wilderness' of the Bible, across which the Israelites journeyed in search of the Promised Land, having been delivered from the Egyptian army by the celebrated parting of the Red Sea that allowed the 'Children of Israel' to safely gain access to the dry land of Sinai. It was here that God is said to have first spoken to Moses from a burning bush and it was at the summit of Mt Sinai that God delivered his Ten Commandments to Moses:

Tell the children of Israel; Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians... If ye will obey my voice and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine. And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.

And Mount Sinai was altogether in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and the whole mount quaked greatly... And the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai... and called Moses up to the top of the mount... And God spoke all these words, saying, I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

Exodus 19:4-6; 19:18-20:3

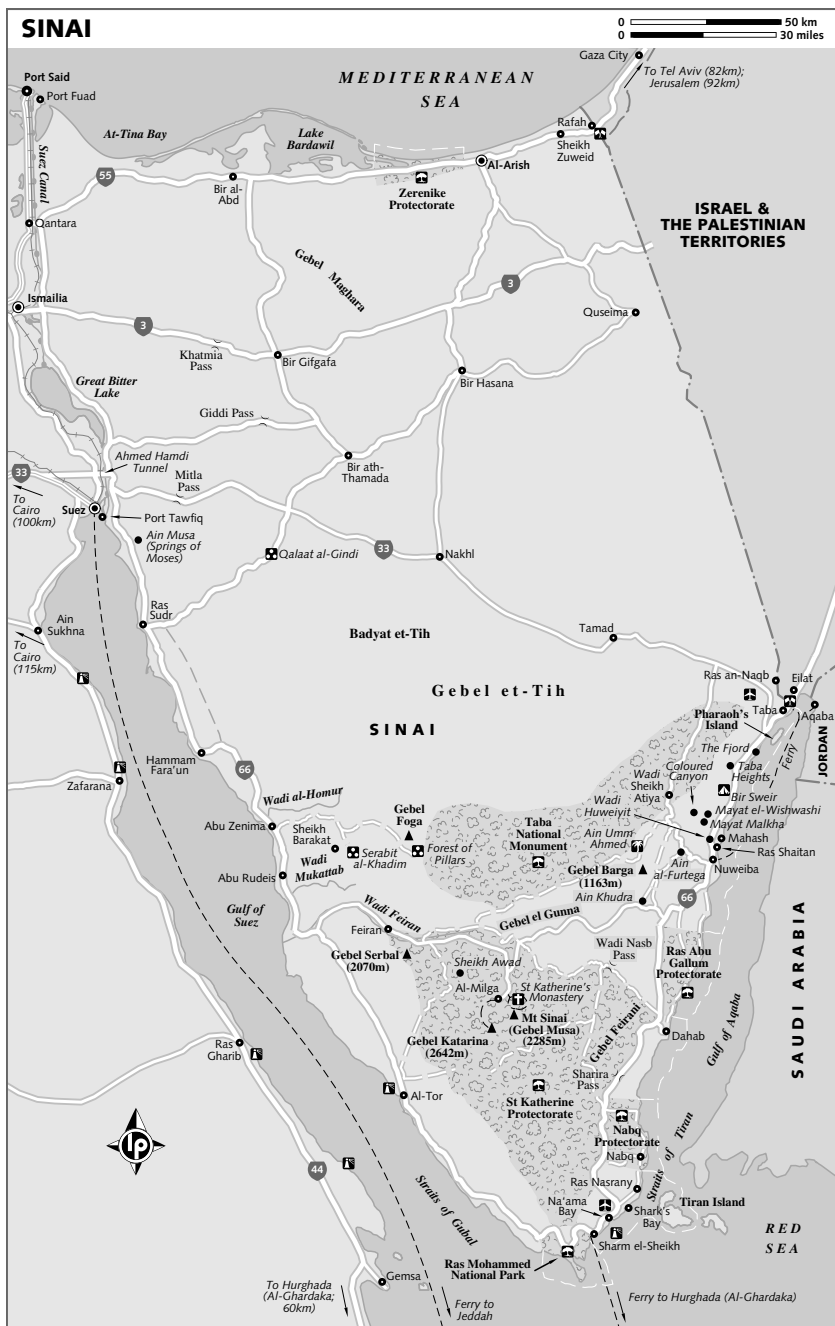
Early in the Christian era, Sinai was a place for Christian Egyptians to escape Roman persecution. Monasticism is thought to have begun here as early as the 3rd century AD, with most hermits settling in the caves of Wadi Feiran, on the assumption that Gebel Serbal, located nearby, was in fact the 'Mountain of God'. By the time the Emperor Justinian founded a monastery at the foot of Mt Sinai (Gebel Musa) in the 6th century, it had been decided that this was the mountain on which God had spoken. For centuries thereafter, the peninsula became a place of pilgrimage. It later became one of the routes taken to Mecca by Muslim pilgrims. Until recently the majority of its inhabitants were Bedouin, the only people who are capable of surviving in the harsh environment of the peninsula.

In recent years Sinai has become the focus of development and 'reconstruction' in much the same way that the New Valley in the Western Desert was during the 1970s and 1980s, when landless *jellaheen* (peasant farmers) from an overcrowded Nile Valley were encouraged to move to the oases. The government has built a new pipeline, called the Al-Salam Canal, to bring fresh water from the Suez Canal to various areas of North Sinai that have been targeted for resettlement. Agriculture is to be expanded dramatically, roads are being paved and desalination plants are being installed in coastal towns.

Tourism, too, has brought great changes, especially around the Gulf of Aqaba. Surveys estimate that the southern tourist town of Sharm el-Sheikh has seen a tenfold population increase in the past 15 years, and the small villages of Dahab and Nuweiba have grown into sprawling beachfront tourist towns. The Bedouin, the traditional inhabitants of Sinai, are now a minority in their native land. Marginalised by Cairo-based tour operators and a suspicious and aggressive police force, they have little means to resist all this change.

Climate

Sinai's climate is extreme: on one hand it can get very hot, so remember always to carry



water, use copious amounts of sunblock and wear sensible clothes to avoid sunburn (wearing a T-shirt while snorkelling is advisable), as well as a hat or scarf. On the other hand, while summer temperatures can climb to 50°C, it gets very cold at night, and the mountains can be freezing during the day. Come prepared with warm clothing, especially if you'll be trekking or climbing Mt Sinai. Camping out in winter requires a warm sleeping bag and a good jacket – snow is frequent at this time of year.

Dangers & Annoyances

Because of the peninsula's unique position between cultures and continents, its occasionally tumultuous history, its mountainous terrain and – in more recent times – its tourist masses, Sinai has traditionally had a higher security profile than other parts of the country.

In recent years, the region of Sinai has been thrust into the international spotlight following a string of high-profile bombings. On 7 October 2004, three bomb attacks in the Taba area killed 34 people and injured over 150 people. The worst attack occurred when a truck drove into the lobby of the Taba Hilton and exploded – 10 floors of the hotel collapsed following the blast. According to the Egyptian government, the bombers were Palestinians who had tried to enter Israel to carry out attacks there but were unsuccessful.

On 23 July 2005 a series of coordinated bombings in the tourist market of Sharm el-Sheikh killed 88 people and injured close to 200 people. The bombing coincided with Egypt's Revolution Day, which commemorates Nasser's 1952 overthrow of King Farouk – it was the deadliest terrorist action in the country's history. A group calling itself the 'Abdullah Azzam Brigades' was the first to claim responsibility for the attacks. Additional claims were later made by two other groups calling themselves the 'Tawhid and Jihad Group in Egypt' and 'Holy Warriors of Egypt'.

On 24 April 2006, three bombs exploded in Dahab – two near the bridge in the centre of town and one near the Ghazala Supermarket – which killed 23 people and injured over 75 people. The attacks occurred during a public holiday where crowds were celebrating Sham Al-Nasseim

(Spring festival), and were carried out by Bedouin suicide bombers. The Egyptian government later stated that these attacks were the work of an organisation called Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (Monotheism and Jihad).

It is impossible to offer anything other than blind speculation bordering on irrational fear regarding the possibility of a future terrorist attack in Sinai. With that said, it's worth checking your embassy's travel advisory to get an update on the situation before making any plans. However, it's important to remember that the overwhelming majority of travellers to Sinai enjoy their visits without incident.

On a different note, while G-strings and topless sunbathing seem to be *de rigueur* for some tourist groups in Sharm el-Sheikh, women should be aware that Egypt is a conservative country and tourists have been assaulted in Sinai. While rape is rare, it does occur, so do not sunbathe alone in an isolated location, and try to choose a somewhat modest bathing costume (best to leave the string bikini at home!). You should also keep in mind that as well as offending the local people, topless sunbathing is illegal in Sinai, as well as in the rest of Egypt.

Getting There & Away

Sinai's international air hub is at Sharm el-Sheikh, which receives regular charters from Europe in addition to local flights. There is also an international airport in Taba, though it currently receives only occasional charter flights. For overland travel, the peninsula is linked to the mainland by the Ahmed Hamdi Tunnel, and by the Mubarak Peace Suspension Bridge, both of which connect to main arteries to Cairo. The 1.6km-long tunnel, which goes under the Suez Canal near Suez, was completed in 1982 and named after a martyr of the 1973 war. It is open 24 hours. There are frequent buses connecting Cairo and other destinations with all major towns on the Sinai Peninsula. A railway has been built to part of North Sinai, but there are no passenger services.

Getting Around

Because of Sinai's rugged landscape, paved roads link only the permanent settlements,

PROTECTING SINAI'S FRAGILE ECOSYSTEMS

Although much of Sinai is made up of hot, dry desert, it is full of life. Craggy mountains are sliced by dry gravel wadis in which sprout the odd acacia tree or clump of gnarled tamarisk, while a surprisingly rich variety of plants tenuously cling to the loose, sandy flanks of coastal dunes. Once every few years, when storm clouds gather over the mountains and dump buckets of water onto this parched landscape, the entire scene is transformed into a sea of greenery as seeds that have lain dormant for months burst into life. For Sinai's wildlife, such as the gazelle and rock hyrax (as well as for the goats herded by local Bedouin people), these rare occasions are times of plenty.

Yet these fragile ecosystems – which depend on a delicate balance of conditions for their survival – have come under increasing threat from the rapid onslaught of tourism. Until relatively recently, the only people to wander through this region were Bedouin on camels. Now adventure seekers in ever-multiplying numbers are ploughing their way through in 4WDs and quad bikes (four-wheeled motorcycles) in search of pristine spots, and in so doing, churning up the soil, uprooting plants and contributing to erosion.

In order to minimise the environmental damage, the government has banned vehicles from going off road in certain areas, including Ras Mohammed National Park and the protected areas of Nabq, Ras Abu Gallum and Taba. Yet enforcement in Sinai's vast wilderness areas is difficult, and while rangers do patrol protectorates, a large part of the responsibility is left with visitors to follow the rules. To do your part, try not to be persuaded by over-eager guides wanting to show you something that's off the beaten track. If you really want to explore the region in depth, do it in the age-old fashion – go on foot or by camel, with the necessary provisions. Also be aware of rubbish, which has become an increasingly serious threat to Sinai's ecosystems. Dive clubs located in Dahab and Sharm el-Sheikh organise regular rubbish dives, and always find far more than they can collect. You should carry out all your litter with you, and dispose of it thoughtfully. And wherever you visit, treat Sinai's ecosystems – both those above and below the sea – with care.

and public transport is not as regular as elsewhere in Egypt. You can get to all major destinations if you travel by bus, but in many cases there are only a couple of connections each day – and sometimes there is only one. Service taxis are a popular means of transport in northern Sinai (primarily along the route connecting Rafah and Al-Arish with Suez and Cairo). Elsewhere on the peninsula, with the exception of the coastal route to Al-Tor, it is only possible to arrange a service taxi by bargaining and paying far more than would be the case over similar distances elsewhere in Egypt.

If you are driving yourself, you will need to exercise caution at all times. Stick to tracks when going off the road, as there are still mines left over from the wars with Israel. When at the wheel in winter, remember that it rains with some frequency in Sinai, and flash floods often wash out paved roads, particularly around Wadi Feiran. Bus drivers are a good source of information on trouble spots.

COAST

A barren coastline of extraordinary beauty, the Sinai Coast is the meeting spot of choice for the world's political leaders, a booming package-tourism destination and nirvana for the members of the international diving fraternity. Over the past several millennia some of human history's most significant events have played out against these isolated shores, and today the region remains sacred to all the world's major monotheistic religions. Of course, this doesn't alter the simple fact that the majority of international travellers make regular pilgrimages to the coast for its isolated beaches, superb coral reefs and unique Bedouin culture.

AIN MUSA

Ain Musa or the 'Springs of Moses' is said to be the place where Moses and the Israelites camped after crossing into Sinai, and where Moses – on discovering that the water was too bitter to drink – took the advice of God and threw a special tree into the springs, miracu-

lously sweetening the water. Unfortunately, however, only one of the 12 original springs still exists, and is now sadly filled with litter and surrounded by a stand of date palms.

The site is about 25km south of the Ahmed Hamdi Tunnel, just off the main road and signposted only in Arabic. It is watched over by an officer from the antiquities department, together with a group of eager guides. Camping at the site is possible in theory, but unappealing due to the litter, the proximity of the roadway and a nearby settlement. There's also no drinkable water (as the spring water is too brackish, with no sign of Moses' special tree).

It's best to visit with your own vehicle, or on a tour organised through one of the hotels in Ras Sudr (below). All buses heading south pass by here and will drop you off, though it can be difficult to find onward transport.

RAS SUDR

☎ 069

Ras Sudr (or simply Sudr) was originally developed as the base town for one of Egypt's largest oil refineries, though its coastline and proximity to Cairo have spurred its transition into a resort area. Due to the lack of offshore reefs, the international community has mostly bypassed Sudr, though wealthy Cairene families have been more than happy to snatch up coastal time-share villas. However, with uninterrupted winds blowing at mostly force five or six, Sudr does enjoy a fine reputation among windsurfers.

The town centre, which lies just off the main highway, boasts several small restaurants, a post office, a bank and various small shops. Well away from here, to the south and north, are a handful of ageing resorts interspersed with blocks of holiday villas.

One of the most famous places for wind- and kite-surfing, **Moon Beach** (☎ 581 0088; www.moonbeachretreat.com; 7-night all-inclusive package per person US\$650; ☹ ☹) is where the British magazine *Boards* tests equipment each year. Located on the Gulf of Suez just off the main coastal road, Moon Beach has beachfront bungalows with all the trimmings. Additionally, there's a professionally staffed and stocked wind- and kite-surfing centre, as well as a fully licensed school for budding surfers of all kinds. Nightly rates and shorter-stay packages are available – contact Moon Beach for more information.

East Delta has a bus station along the main road about 500m south of the main junction.

Buses to Cairo (££25, two to three hours) depart at 7.30am, 2pm and 4pm. A taxi from the bus station in Ras Sudr to Moon Beach costs about ££25 to ££30.

HAMMAM FARA'UN

Hammam Fara'un, or Pharaoh's Bath, is the site of a hot-springs complex that is commonly used by local Bedouin as a cure for various ailments ranging from arthritis to rheumatism. The springs are located in a cave beside the beach, but are too hot for all but the most dedicated hot-springs fans. Women who decide to brave the waters should avoid swimming in anything more daring than leggings and a baggy T-shirt.

Hammam Fara'un is about 50km south of Ras Sudr, and signposted only in Arabic. It's best to visit with your own transport or with a tour from Moon Beach (left), especially since there is no place to stay near the springs.

AL-TOR

☎ 069

Al-Tor, also known as Tur Sinai, has been a significant port since ancient times, though today it primarily serves as the administrative capital of the South Sinai Governorate. With stiff and constant breezes similar to those buffeting the coastline further north around Ras Sudr, Al-Tor has been trying in recent years to establish itself as a wind- and kite-surfing destination.

National Bank of Egypt has a branch with an ATM; it's in the town centre near the post office. If you've overstayed your welcome in Egypt, you can extend your visa at the Mogamma, the large administrative building on the main road in the town centre.

About 5km from town are some hot springs known as **Hammam Musa** (admission ££20), which tradition holds to have been one of the possible stopping points used by Moses and the Israelites on their journey through Sinai. It's possible to bathe in the springs, and there are some paved walkways, a changing area and a small café.

The focal point of wind- and kite-surfing in Al-Tor is the **Moses Bay Hotel** (☎ 377 4343; www.mosesbayeltor.com; 7-night all-inclusive package per person US\$200; ☹ ☹), which also happens to be the nicest place in the area. Located approximately 3km from town smack dab on the beach, Moses Bay has its own private stretch of sand, pleasant rooms, a restaurant, and a wind- and kite-surfing centre. Although it's not as upscale as

HISTORY'S FOOTPRINTS

Sinai's rugged expanses are dotted with traces of early settlements and pilgrimage routes. One of the most impressive sites is **Serabit al-Khadim**, a ruined Pharaonic temple surrounded by ancient turquoise mines and starkly beautiful landscapes. Despite the remoteness of the location, turquoise was mined here as far back as the Old Kingdom. The temple itself dates back to the 12th dynasty and is dedicated to the goddess Hathor. Beside it is a New Kingdom shrine to Sopdu, god of the Eastern Desert. Throughout the temple's many courts, inscriptions list the temple's benefactors, including Hatshepsut (1473–1458 BC) and Tutmosis III (1479–1425 BC). It is thought to have been abandoned during the reign of Ramses VII.

Serabit al-Khadim can be reached via an unsignposted track just south of the coastal settlement of Abu Zenima or, more interestingly, from a track branching north off the road running east through Wadi Feiran via **Wadi Mukattab** (Valley of Inscriptions), which itself is well worth a visit. Here Sinai's largest collection of rock inscriptions and stelae, some dating back to the 3rd dynasty, give further evidence of ancient turquoise mining activities. Unfortunately, many of the workings and stelae were damaged when the British unsuccessfully tried to revive the mines in 1901.

Heading inland from Serabit al-Khadim, another track takes you through the colourful wadis of **Gebel Foga** to the cliffs that edge Gebel et-Tih and the **Forest of Pillars**, a naturally occurring phenomenon accessible with 4WD and camel via a long track.

All of these destinations require guides and a 4WD. The most straightforward way to visit is to arrange a jeep trip with Moon Beach resort (p459), or with an outfit in Na'ama Bay.

If you're travelling in your own vehicle, you can head into the village of **Sheikh Barakat** and get a guide: coming from Ras Sudr, follow the marked track that leads off into the desert, just south of Abu Zenima, for about 39km. When you see a white dome on your right, take the track to your left. After about 3km you'll come to Sheikh Barakat, where you can camp (the closest hotels are in Al-Tor and Ras Sudr), and organise a guide to take you the remaining 7km to the trail leading up to Serabit al-Khadim. At the end of this you'll need to park your vehicle and climb for about an hour. The track up the mountain is steep at times and involves a bit of scrambling, but can be handled by anyone who is reasonably fit. Coming from Wadi Feiran, you can negotiate for a guide in the village of Feiran.

Moon Beach, it offers great value assuming you're prepared to sacrifice a bit on the glitz.

The East Delta bus station is along the main road at the northern edge of town opposite the hospital, and about 700m from the Delmon Hotel. Buses depart from 7am onwards throughout the day to Sharm el-Sheikh (£E12 to £E15, 1½ hours). From the bus station, you can hire a pick-up for £E10 to take you to the Moses Bay Hotel, or you can arrange transport directly with the hotel.

RAS MOHAMMED NATIONAL PARK

About 20km west of Sharm el-Sheikh on the road from Al-Tor lies the headland of **Ras Mohammed National Park** (admission per person US\$5, per vehicle additional US\$5; ☎ 8am–5pm), named by local fishermen for a cliff that resembles a man's profile. The waters surrounding the peninsula are considered the jewel in the crown of the Red Sea. The park is inundated with more than 50,000 visitors annually, enticed

by the prospect of marvelling at some of the world's most spectacular coral-reef ecosystems, including a profusion of coral species and teeming marine life. Most, if not all, of the Red Sea's 1000 species of fish can be seen in the park's waters, including sought-after pelagics, such as hammerheads, manta rays and whale sharks.

History

The most ancient corals at Ras Mohammed are fossil reefs dating back some two million years. Because they are similar in composition and structure to present-day reefs, they are an invaluable source of scientific information about changing sea levels and past climatic conditions.

Ras Mohammed was declared a marine reserve in 1983 and became Egypt's first national park in 1989. At the time of its declaration, the park was the subject of controversy, but since then has proved its value in prevent-

ing the area's fragile environment from being destroyed by the sort of development that has transformed the Sharm el-Sheikh coast. Hotels are not permitted, only 12% of the park is accessible to visitors and limits are applied to the number of dive boats allowed.

Orientation & Information

Ras Mohammed occupies a total of 480 sq km of land and sea, including the desert in and around the *ras* (headland), Tiran Island, and the shoreline between Sharm el-Sheikh harbour and Nabq Protectorate.

You'll need your passport to enter the park. Visitors on Sinai-only permits cannot go to Ras Mohammed overland as it is beyond the Sharm el-Sheikh boundary, but should not have any problem on dive boat trips – check with the dive clubs if you have any doubts.

The entrance to the park is about 20km from the reefs. A **visitors' centre** (☎ 10am-sunset Sat-Thu) with a restaurant is clearly marked to the left of the main access road in an area known as Marsa Ghoslane. Videos are shown here, and you may be able to pick up a booklet highlighting local fauna. The park is laid out

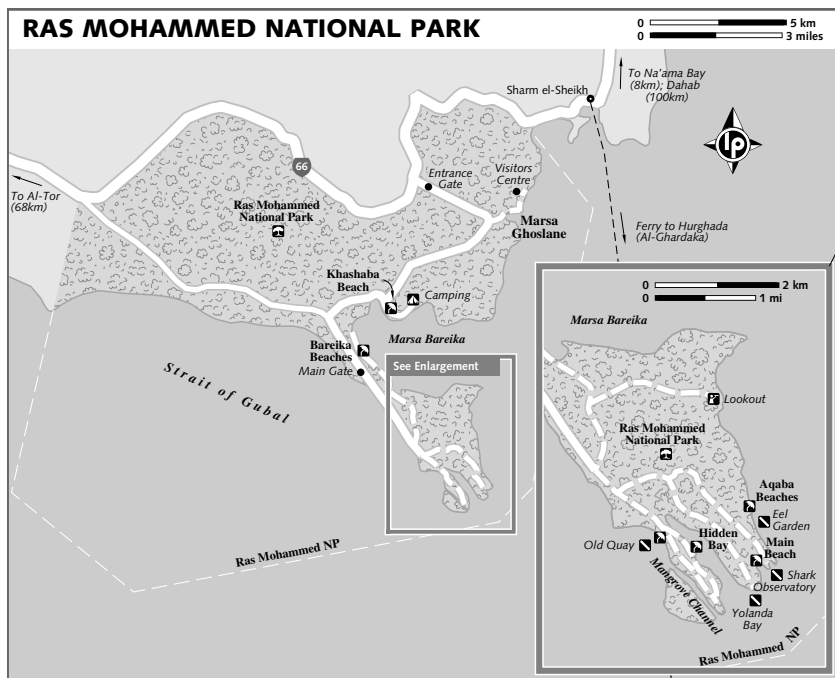
with colour-coded trails and clearly marked pictograms of what each site offers.

Activities

If you're planning to dive in Ras Mohammed, you will need to arrive via a boat tour or a live-aboard, both of which typically depart from Sharm el-Sheikh (p462) or Dahab (p472). For more information on dive operators, as well as an overview of the best dive sites in the national park, see p447.

If you arrive at the national park by private car, it's possible to hike to a variety of wilderness beaches and go snorkelling on a variety of offshore reefs – you will need to bring your own equipment.

At the park's laboratory, a pink trail leads to **Khashaba Beach** and a camping area. Yellow arrows lead to the sandy beaches and calm waters of **Marsa Bareika**, excellent for snorkelling and safe for children. Blue arrows take you to **Main Beach**, which gets crowded with day visitors, but remains one of the best places to see vertical coral walls. Brown arrows lead to **Aqaba Beaches**, which border the **Eel Garden**, named after a colony of garden eels 20m



down. Just beyond here, orange arrows lead to **Shark Observatory**, a cliff-top area where you can sometimes see sharks as they feed from Ras Mohammed's rich offerings. The red arrows lead to **Yolanda Bay**, another beach with good snorkelling, and green arrows lead to the **Mangrove Channel** and **Hidden Bay** and to **Old Quay**, a spectacular vertical reef teeming with fish and accessible to snorkellers.

Sleeping

Camping is permitted in designated areas, with permits (per person US\$5) available from the entrance gate. You'll need to bring all supplies with you; the nearest shops are in Sharm el-Sheikh. If you camp, respect the environment and clean up. In particular, don't bury toilet paper or rubbish, as the relentless winds here mean that nothing stays under the sand for long. Camp rules are enforced by rangers and if you're caught violating them, you may be prosecuted.

Getting There & Around

If you don't have a car, you can hire a taxi from Sharm el-Sheikh to bring you here, but expect to pay at least ££150 for the day. If you don't mind company, the easiest option is to join one of the many day tours by jeep or bus from Sharm el-Sheikh and Na'ama Bay, most of which will drop you at the beaches and snorkelling sites. Expect to pay from ££150. Alternatively, divers are often brought in by boat from tourist centres on the Red Sea.

To move around the park you'll need a vehicle. Access is restricted to certain parts of the park and, for conservation reasons, it's forbidden to leave the official tracks.

SHARM EL-SHEIKH & NA'AMA BAY

☎ 069

The southern coast of the Gulf of Aqaba, between Tiran Island and Ras Mohammed National Park, features some of the world's most amazing underwater scenery. The crystal-clear waters, rare and lovely reefs and an incredible variety of exotic fish darting in and out of the colourful coral have made this a snorkelling and scuba-diving paradise, attracting visitors from all over the globe. Unfortunately, the brash resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh, which comprises the two adjacent bays of Na'ama Bay and Sharm al-Maya, does not reflect this underwater beauty.

Known simply as Sharm by package travellers the world over, Sinai's largest and most famous resort destination has undergone an ill-fated transformation in recent years. What was once a small village that attracted hardcore divers is now a gated Las Vegas-style strip with all the charm of a shopping mall. Today huge concrete blocks of hotels jockey with each other for prime beach space, while wave upon wave of primarily European holiday-makers splash about in pools ringed by security walls. Even worse is the havoc being wrought on the surrounding area as lots are divvied up for condos, and the urban sprawl threatens to transform more of the coastline.

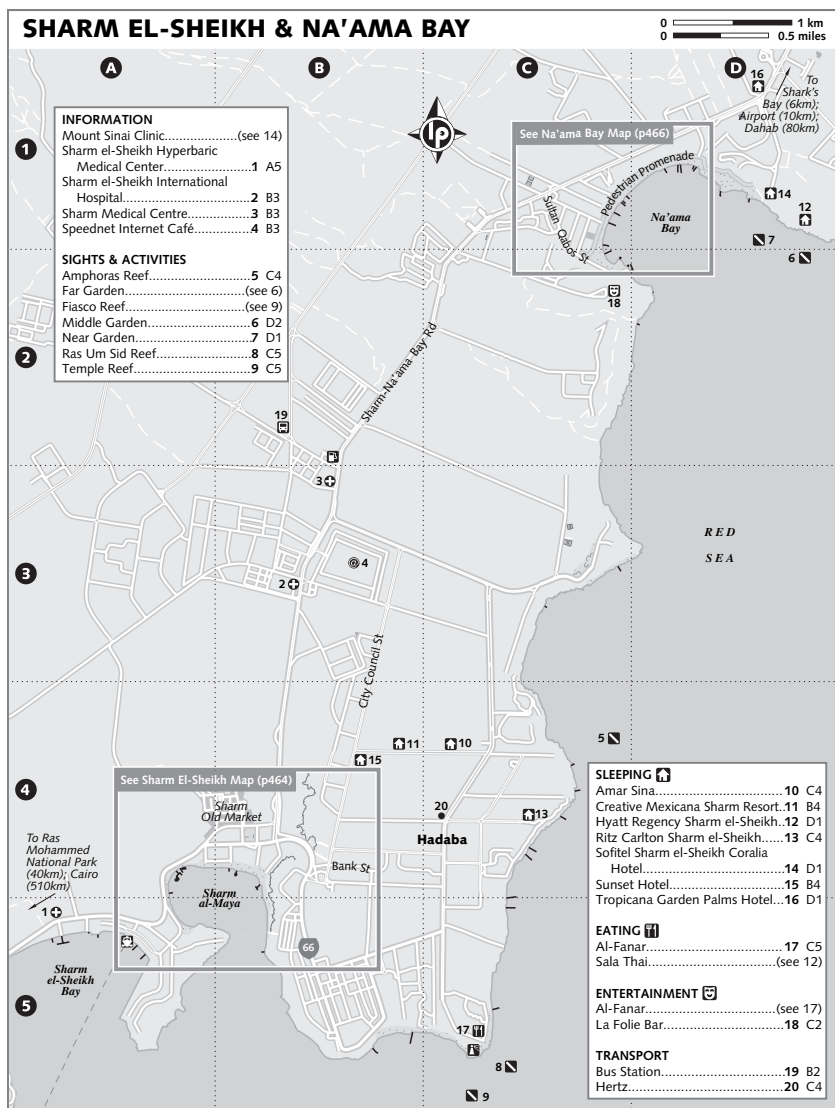
It's easy to criticise Sharm, but it is what it is. If you want to indulge in resort living, party with foreigners into the wee hours of the morning and dine on Western food to your heart's content, welcome to paradise. Sharm is shaping up to be an exclusive European enclave on the edge of Sinai, and it's just a matter of time before any semblance of Egyptian identity is erased. However, if you consider yourself an independent traveller, you'd be wise to skip Sharm, passing through only en route to the more low-key resort town of Dahab (p472).

It's something of a tragedy that Sharm's truly exquisite diving has been overshadowed by irresponsible tourist development. However, offshore dive sites in both Sharm and the adjacent Ras Mohammed National Park are easily accessible by live-aboards, or even from boat trips departing from Dahab. For more information on diving in the Red Sea, see p439.

Orientation

Most resorts are clustered along or just inland from the beach at Na'ama Bay. If you enjoy being in the centre of the action and don't mind the crush of pedestrians, central Na'ama Bay – consisting of a beachfront promenade and a pedestrians-only area lined with hotels, restaurants and shops – is the most convenient base. The further away from this central strip you go, the quieter things become: most of the resorts lining the coast north of Na'ama Bay are comparatively tranquil upscale retreats with their own patch of sand and easy taxi access to the central area.

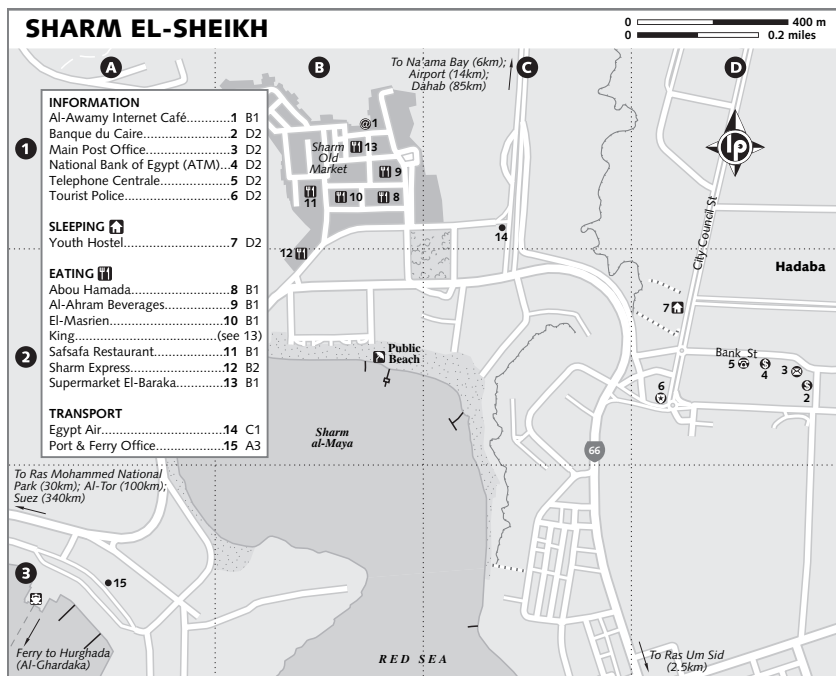
Sharm al-Maya, about 6km west of Na'ama Bay, centres on a large, walled market area known as Sharm Old Market, with a selection



of inexpensive eateries. A large section of the Old Market area was badly damaged in the tragic bombings of July 2005 and has been heavily rebuilt. On the southwestern edge of Sharm al-Maya is the port.

Spread out on a cliff top above Sharm al-Maya is the administrative area of Hadaba, which is rimmed by a barren network of

long, treeless avenues lined with primarily midrange resorts. These are targeted at travellers flying in directly from Europe, and are connected to the beach via shuttle bus. To the southeast of the administrative area is Ras Um Sid, with an agreeable stretch of coastline, a lighthouse and a row of upmarket hotels.



Information

BOOKSHOPS

Al-Ahram Bookshop (Map p466; Sharm-Na'ama Bay rd, Na'ama Bay; ☎ 10am-1.30pm & 6-8pm) Sharm el-Sheikh's best-stocked bookshop, with a reasonable selection of books and magazines.

EMERGENCY

Ambulance (☎ 123)

Tourist police Hadaba (Map p464; ☎ 366 0311); Na'ama Bay (Map p466; ☎ 360 0554, 366 0675; booth next to Marina Sharm Hotel)

INTERNET ACCESS

Many hotels have internet access and there are internet cafés dotted around town.

Al-Awamy Internet Cafe (Map p464; Sharm Old Market, Sharm el-Sheikh; per hr ££5; ☎ 24hr)

Felicita.Net (Map p466; Na'ama Bay; per hr ££20; ☎ 24hr) Above the Egyptian American Bank.

Naama Internet (Map p466; Na'ama Centre, Na'ama Bay; per hr ££20; ☎ noon-3am)

Speednet Internet Café (Map p463; Sharm-Na'ama Bay rd, Sharm el-Sheikh; per hr ££5; ☎ 24hr) In the Delta Sharm complex.

Yes Business Centre (Map p466; Na'ama Bay; per hr ££15; ☎ 11am-1am) Between Mall 7 and Avis car rental.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Mount Sinai Clinic (☎ 012 218 9889; ☎ 24hr); Mövenpick Hotel (Map p466; Na'ama Bay); Sofitel Sharm el-Sheikh Corallia Hotel (Map p463; Na'ama Bay) Specialises in diving-related medical problems as well as ordinary ailments.

Omar & Omar Pharmacy (Map p466; ☎ 360 0960; King of Bahrain St, Na'ama Bay; ☎ 24hr) At Shamandura Supermarket.

Sharm el-Sheikh Hyberbaric Medical Center (Map p463; ☎ 366 0922/3, 012 212 4292; hyper_med_center@sinainet.com.eg; Sharm el-Sheikh; ☎ 24hr)

Sharm el-Sheikh International Hospital (Map p463; ☎ 366 0893/4/5; Sharm-Na'ama Bay rd, Sharm el-Sheikh; ☎ 24hr)

Sharm Medical Center (Map p463; ☎ 366 1744; Sharm-Na'ama Bay rd, Sharm el-Sheikh; ☎ 24hr) Next to the bus station.

MONEY

You will find ATMs every few metres in Na'ama Bay, including several in Na'ama Centre (Map p466), as well as ATMs in the

lobbies of most larger hotels. Otherwise, all the major banks have branches in Hadaba.

Banque du Caire (Map p464; Hadaba; ☎ 8.30am-2pm Sun-Thu)

Banque Misr Hadaba (Map p464; Bank St; ☎ 8.30am-2pm & 5-8pm Sun-Thu); Na'ama Bay (Map p466; King of Bahrain St) ATM.

Commercial International Bank (Map p466; Na'ama Center, Na'ama Bay; ☎ 9am-1pm & 6-10pm Sat-Thu, 10-11am Fri)

Egyptian American Bank (Map p466; ☎ 360 1423; Na'ama Bay; ☎ 8.30am-2pm Mon-Thu) American Express agent; diagonally opposite Cataract Resort.

National Bank of Egypt Hadaba (Map p464; Bank St; ☎ 8.30am-2pm & 6-9pm Sat-Thu, 9am-1pm & 6-9pm Fri); Na'ama Bay (Map p466; Na'ama Centre; ☎ 6pm-1am) ATM.

Thomas Cook (Map p466; ☎ 360 1808; Gafy Mall, Sharm-Na'ama Bay rd, Na'ama Bay; ☎ 9am-2pm & 6-10pm) Just west of Sinai Star Hotel.

Western Union (Map p466; ☎ 364 0466; Rosetta Hotel, Na'ama Bay; ☎ 8.30am-2pm & 6-10pm Sat-Thu, 3-10pm Fri)

POST

Main post office (Map p464; Bank St, Hadaba; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sat-Thu)

TELEPHONE

There are several cardphones in Na'ama Bay and at least two on the beachfront promenade. Cards can be bought everywhere, but watch out for overcharging by shopkeepers. There are also several call centres where you can dial internationally for ££4 to ££7 per minute.

Telephone centrale (Map p464; Bank St, Hadaba; ☎ 24hr).

Dangers & Annoyances

In July 2005, three terrorist bombs exploded in Sharm el-Sheikh, killing 88 people and injuring over 200. The worst damage was in the Sharm Old Market area and near the Ghazala Hotel in Na'ama Bay. In the wake of the bombings, the Egyptian government increased security at all Sharm el-Sheikh hotels and began building a fence around the town. The government has also been working to revive tourism to the city with incentives ranging from discounted flight prices to free concerts. At the time of writing, reconstruction of the affected establishments was nearly complete, and tourist numbers were returning to normal, although the scars of the attack clearly remain.

For an overview of the history of terrorism in Sinai, see p457.

Activities

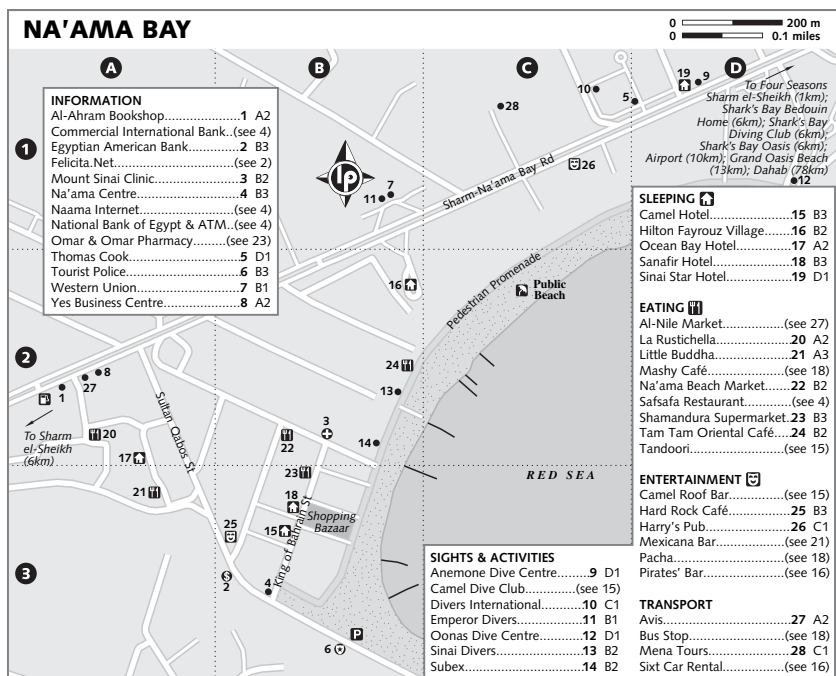
SNORKELLING & DIVING

Snorkelling in the waters around Sharm is excellent. While there are some easily accessed reefs in central Na'ama Bay, it's better to make your way to the more impressive **Near and Middle Gardens** (Map p463), or the even more beautiful **Far Garden** (Map p463). The Near Garden is around the point at the northern end of the bay just below the Sofitel hotel, and the Middle and Far Gardens are below the Hyatt Regency hotel. All can be reached on foot, or you can take a boat organised by one of the diving centres; bring plenty of drinking water and sunblock along.

Another prime spot for snorkelling is **Ras Um Sid Reef** (Map p463), near the lighthouse at Sharm el-Sheikh, which is known for its fan corals and plethora of fish, although the small beach is parcelled up between several resorts and can get quite crowded. Apart from Ras Um Sid Reef, the popular **Temple and Fiasco Reefs** (Map p463) are within easy swimming distance, and while they're primarily dive destinations, snorkellers can still get a taste of their flora and fauna. Beside the Ritz Carlton hotel is **Amphoras Reef** (Map p463), another popular snorkelling spot. On the road to the airport, **Shark's Bay** also has a good reef, which is frequented by large rays in springtime. Tickets for beach use cost ££15, and are issued at the camps on the left side of the beach.

It's possible to get to more distant sites by joining a dive boat, which can be arranged at most local dive clubs; expect to pay US\$25 to US\$50 for a day trip. Many of the clubs also do snorkelling trips to Ras Mohammed National Park (p461), with prices starting at about US\$50. While there is some excellent snorkelling in the park, be sure that you'll be taken to a suitable site, as some dive destinations are not always ideal for snorkellers, and some areas have strong currents that are not for the faint-hearted.

Most dive clubs rent out masks, snorkels and fins. Remember that the same reef-protection rules apply to snorkellers as to divers. As snorkellers tend to stick to shallower waters, their fins often do more damage to reefs than those of divers, so take care to keep your distance from the corals. For more on reef-protection measures, see the boxed text (p450).



For an overview of diving in the Red Sea, including recommended operators and dive sites, see p439.

WATER SPORTS

Most major hotels offer a range of other water sports, including sailing lessons, windsurfing, parasailing, pedalos, banana boats and glass-bottom boats. Most hotels also have beach access – either their own stretch of waterfront, or by agreement with another resort. Check when booking, as the beaches of some hotels are fairly distant (up to 10km) from the hotel itself and can only be accessed via shuttle. There is a narrow stretch of public beach diagonally opposite Hilton Fayrouz Village on Na'ama Bay, but it is so crowded with rental chairs that it is difficult to see the sand. Keep in mind that it's illegal to swim off Na'ama Bay after 11pm, and that despite all the development, the beaches and waters of Na'ama Bay are part of the Ras Mohammed National Park and its regulations apply here.

In Sharm al-Maya there is also a stretch of public beach. However, there's no reef,

and women swimming here are likely to be ogled by young Egyptian men.

CAMEL RIDES

Camel rides to 'traditional Bedouin villages' can be easily arranged with most hotels, but it's usually a better and more authentic experience if you can negotiate treks directly with the Bedouin in Dahab (p475) or Nuweiba (p481). If you decide to try one from Sharm, expect to pay US\$40 to US\$60, and to find yourself in the midst of a large group.

HORSE RIDING

Several top-end hotels, including **Sofitel Sharm el-Sheikh Coralia Hotel** (Map p463; ☎ 360 0081; www.sofitel.com; Na'ama Bay), offer horse riding from about US\$20 to \$30 per hour.

Tours

Almost all travel agencies and large hotels organise jeep or bus trips to St Katherine's Monastery (p490), and to desert attractions such as the Coloured Canyon (p475). However, most of the guides are Nile Valley dwellers, not Bedouin, and the groups are

often large. Better, more sensitive trips can be arranged from Dahab and Nuweiba.

Sleeping

Sharm el-Sheikh and the surrounding area has one of the greatest concentration of hotels in Egypt, though you're going to have to pay to play here. Budget accommodation is virtually nonexistent, and the variety of options isn't much better if you're not a fan of the all-inclusive resort.

If you're travelling on a budget, there's little choice beyond the youth hostel in Sharm el-Sheikh and a camp in Shark's Bay. Again, Sharm is unashamedly budget unfriendly, so if you're serious about pinching your pennies, it's probably wise to continue on to Dahab.

If you're looking for a decent hotel that won't break the bank, a cluster of midrange hotels has sprung up in the area rimming Hadaba. While lacking ambience – most hotels are spread along or near a wide concrete strip – prices are more reasonable than on the waterfront, and most places have shuttle buses to take guests to the beach at Ras Um Sid or to Na'ama Bay. Beachfront hotels in Na'ama Bay are generally pricey affairs, though for a better deal, choose one that's set back a bit.

The entire coast from Na'ama Bay northwards towards the airport has been the target of a massive construction boom in recent years, and is now home to a large number of five-star resorts. Flaunting luxury names, all are geared to visitors on all-inclusive tours, and are usually booked from outside Egypt or as part of a package.

The Shark's Bay area, about 6km north-east of Na'ama Bay, was once home to a quiet Bedouin village, though over the past decade has been developed with amazing rapidity. Today this stretch of coast is now a row of exclusive luxury hotels – if you're staying at any of these top-end resorts, your every whim will be catered for.

Be advised that the hotel scene in Sharm is changing rapidly, which means that the following information is likely to become outdated quickly. Also keep in mind that prices in Sharm are more volatile than other parts of the country, and are subject to wild fluctuations depending on the number of tourists in town. Although we've tried to give approximate prices for hotels, it's worth noting that cheaper rate are nearly always

available if you book in advance, especially as part of an all-inclusive package.

BUDGET

Youth Hostel (Map p464; ☎ 366 0317; City Council St, Hadaba; r from ££60; 🚻) The only attraction of this shabby affair is that it's the cheapest place to stay in the area. Rooms are utterly soulless, but at least a night here won't put you in the poorhouse. It's up on the hill in Hadaba, near the police station and mosque and away from the beach, though frequent minibuses pass by that can take you to Na'ama Bay or Ras Um Sid.

Shark's Bay Bedouin Home (off Map p466; ☎ 360 0942; www.sharksbay.com; sea-view huts s/d/tr US\$12/15/18, cabin s/d from US\$15/20, room s/d/tr US\$30/40/50; 🚻) This long-standing Bedouin-owned camp, also known as Shark's Bay Umbi, has a relaxed ambience, simple but clean huts with shared bathrooms up on the cliff, and pricier huts down below with air-con and bathroom. There's also the Bedouin-style tented Shark's Bay Umbi Restaurant (mains ££20 to ££35) overlooking the water. To reach the camp, just tell the taxi driver 'Shark's Bay Bedouin'; expect to pay about ££25 from Na'ama Bay and ££50 from the port at Sharm. If you're driving, take the airport road from town to a right-hand turn-off for the Savoy and Conrad Concorde hotels, follow this road for 400m to the right-hand turn-off for Gardenia Plaza, then turn and continue 2km further to Shark's Bay.

MIDRANGE

Sunset Hotel (Map p463; ☎ 366 1673/4; www.sharmsunset.com; Hadaba; r from US\$50; 🚻 📺 🚿) An affordable midrange hotel, the three-star Sunset is a good deal assuming you don't mind being off the beach. Slightly ageing rooms are spruced up a bit with the careful addition of a few well-placed rugs, though the large pool is as inviting as it's ever been. If you start to get a little cabin fever, you can easily access the beach at Ras Um Sid.

Ocean Bay Hotel (Map p466; ☎ 360 1012; r from US\$55; 🚻 📺 🚿) This relatively characterless concrete box is not exactly one of the most atmospheric hotels on the block. But, in the rapidly expanding sprawl that is Sharm, location is everything, and the Ocean Bay is within easy walking distance of Na'ama Bay's beachfront promenade. Although you might not want to linger on the hotel grounds for

too long, the beach is right there whenever you want it.

Sinai Star Hotel (Map p466; ☎ 360 0652; www.tropicana-hotels.com; Sharm-Na'ama Bay rd; r from US\$55; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This fairly plain but well-run three-star hotel isn't a bad choice if you're looking for an affordable base in an expensive neighbourhood. Set back from the road behind Na'ama Bay, it isn't on the beach, but you're not that far away if you don't mind walking. And, of course, there are several daily shuttles to/from Grand Oasis beach near the airport if you're looking for a change of scene.

Amar Sina (Map p463; ☎ 366 2222/9; www.minasegypt.com; Hadaba; r from US\$75; 🍷 🍷 🍷) With soaring domes, graceful arches and whitewashed walls adorned with brick ornaments, this *Arabian Nights*-styled hotel upholds Sharm's renowned kitsch factor. Of course, guests don't seem to be bothered by this one bit, especially when sunning themselves with drink in hand beside the palm-fringed free-form swimming pool. Although it's set a bit back from the shore, guests have access to beach space at Ras Um Sid.

Tropicana Garden Palms Hotel (Map p463; ☎ 360 1290/1; www.tropicana-hotels.com; Sharm-Na'ama Bay rd; r from US\$75; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Located on the inland side of the main road in Na'ama Bay, several kilometres east of the central strip, this family-friendly hotel comes complete with two pools, views to the mountains and a children's play area. Spacious rooms are decorated in bold colours and natural tiling, and look out onto the attractive grounds. Although you're away from the beach, there is a free hourly shuttle service to the beach at Shark's Bay.

Creative Mexicana Sharm Resort (Map p463; ☎ 02-257 7029; www.worldofcreative.com/hotels/maxicana/max_home.htm; Hadaba; r from US\$85; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Looking for a little Latin flavour in your Middle Eastern beach holiday? Why not, this is Sharm after all! Well-appointed rooms are decorated in natural hues, and surround the lush grounds and sculpted infinity-edge pool. There are plenty of restaurants on the grounds, including the obligatory Mexican spot. However, don't eat too much as guests can take advantage of two nearby stretches of sand, and it's not good to swim on a full stomach!

Sanafir Hotel (Map p466; ☎ 360 0197; reserva@sanafirhotel.com; King of Bahrain St; r from US\$95; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Located smack dab in the nerve centre of Na'ama Bay, the Sanafir was one of

the first hotels to be built here. Over the years, however, the Sanafir has undergone extensive renovations to keep up with the rapidly increasing competition, though the Bedouin-style rooms that made this place so memorable are still intact. The Sanafir has also expanded its offerings of restaurants, lounges and bars, though with its nearly unbeatable location, Na'ama Bay is literally at your doorstep.

Camel Hotel (Map p466; ☎ 360 0700; www.cameldive.com; King of Bahrain St; r from US\$95; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This attractive, small and well-appointed four-star hotel is attached to a dive centre of the same name in the heart of Na'ama Bay. Needless to say, diving is the main attraction here – even the swimming pool is tiered, allowing for open-water skills to be practised in a confined environment. If you're looking to take a course or book a bunch of dives, you can save a bit of cash if you arrange a package in advance.

TOP END

Hilton Fayrouz Village (Map p466; ☎ 360 0137; www.hiltonworldresorts.com; r from US\$150; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This sweep of deluxe bungalows along the promenade somehow manages to capture a degree of intimacy absent from its giant neighbours. Although paling in comparison to the shows of wealth and privilege found at competing hotels, you can easily bask in the lap of luxury here without being a millionaire. As you'd expect of any Hilton, the Fayrouz Village has the usual assortment of infinity pools, gourmet restaurants and top-notch resort facilities.

Hyatt Regency Sharm el-Sheikh (Map p463; ☎ 360 1234; www.sharm.hyatt.com; r from US\$225; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Luxuriously perched above the rich corals of the Near Garden reef, this five-star charmer is perfectly positioned to take in the rich turquoise and cobalt blue hues of the Red Sea. Even if you never leave the resort, the entire property is awash with panoramic views, giving the Hyatt an open feeling rarely found at resorts. And there's a little reason to leave, as the Hyatt overwhelms guests with opulence, from the classically decorated rooms to the perfectly manicured gardens and lashings of marble at every turn.

Sofitel Sharm el-Sheikh Coralina Hotel (Map p463; ☎ 360 0081; www.sofitel.com; r from US\$235; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Dominating the bay's northern cliffs, this whitewashed hotel terraces majestically down towards the sea like a Sultan's palace from a children's fairy tale. The distinctly Middle

Eastern-style rooms are decked out in exotic wooden furniture, and boast stunning views over the bay. True to its name, the Sofitel offers an incredibly sophisticated resort experience to the guests privileged enough to be staying here.

Ritz Carlton Sharm el-Sheikh (Map p463; ☎ 366 1919; www.ritzcarlton.com; Ras Um Sid; r from US\$245; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Despite the smooth lines and spotless glass of its architecturally distinct but decidedly modern exterior, the Ritz brims with Old World elegance from the moment you step inside. Expansive rooms and suites are decorated in the finest European furnishings, transporting guests to some forgotten time. Although the entire affair is decidedly un-Egyptian, it's difficult to complain when you're suckling the bosom of luxury.

Four Seasons Sharm el-Sheikh (off Map p466; ☎ 360 3555; www.fourseasons.com/sharmelshikh; r from US\$450; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Unmatched in elegance and sophistication, the Four Seasons is an Arabesque-style pleasure palace built around palm-ringed courtyards and overlooking the Strait of Tiran. From the towering whitewashed walls and intricate geometric lattice workings to the ornate bronze fixtures and richly dyed Persian rugs, the Four Seasons is a model of perfection straight down to the last detail. Of course, you're going to need a small fortune to spend some time here, but it's difficult to put a price on over-the-top indulgence.

Eating

As the unshamed tourist capital of Sinai, Sharm has literally hundreds of restaurants spanning the culinary globe. Though most tourists on all-inclusive packages never seem to stray from their resort, it's certainly worth venturing outside the hotel walls. Although restaurants in Sharm are by no means cheap, the quality is extremely high, particularly the local seafood brought straight to your plate from the Red Sea. And, of course, if you've been in Egypt for any significant amount of time, the sight of international favourites, including Italian, Thai, Indian and Japanese, is likely to get the mouth watering.

Rebuilt after the 2005 bombings, the Old Market in Sharm el-Sheikh functions as the culinary hub of the town. Small, friendly, local-style restaurants predominate, the food is good and the service usually efficient. Na'ama Bay has a large selection of eateries, and it's easy to while away a few hours

each evening walking along the beachfront promenade and sampling different places. Although it's easy to get suckered into the first restaurant you spot, shop around, compare prices and don't be afraid to let your stomach guide you.

If you're staying in the resort strip or in Shark's Bay, you'll either be dining and drinking in luxury at your five-star all-inclusive resort, or self-catering at your Bedouin camp. Of course, frequent taxis and shuttles ply the coastal road, so you're never that far from the action in Sharm el-Sheikh and Na'ama Bay.

There are several small but well-stocked supermarkets in Sharm Old Market, including Supermarket El-Baraka (Map p464) next to the King restaurant, and the large Sharm Express (Map p464). Beer and wine can be bought at **Al-Ahram Beverages** (Map p464; ☎ 366 3133), next to Sinai Star restaurant.

There are numerous supermarkets in central Na'ama Bay, including **Al-Nile Market** (Map p466; 🕒 24hr), next to Avis, and **Na'ama Beach Market** (Map p466; 🕒 9am-2am) opposite the Mövenpick.

King (Map p464; dishes E£2-7; 🕒 from 7am) A clean and popular *fuul* (fava bean paste) and falafel takeaway in the centre of the Old Market, with a range of snacks and the additional advantage of being open early in the morning.

El-Masrien (Map p464; dishes E£5-25) Another popular neighbourhood-style restaurant, El-Masrien offers savoury kebabs and *kofta* (mincemeat and spices grilled on a skewer) to hungry locals and travellers alike – consider this spot the perfect antidote if you've been hitting the booze a bit too hard.

Tam Tam Oriental Café (Map p466; Ghazala Hotel; dishes E£20-60) This popular Egyptian restaurant along the waterside promenade is a laid-back place where you can delve into a range of Egyptian fare, including mezze, kushari and roast pigeon, while relaxing on cushions overlooking the beach and puffing on a *sheesha* (water pipe).

Safsafa Restaurant (Map p464; dishes E£20-50; 🍷) A small establishment offering some of the freshest and cheapest fish in Sharm (whole fish is priced from E£40 to E£50 per kilo) – don't skip on the homemade tahini and *baba gh-anoug* (puree of grilled eggplants with tahini and olive oil).

Abou Hamada (Map p464; mains E£25-35) This unpretentious seafood lover's spot offers an affordable catch of the day special, though you can always settle on the mixed grill if

the sea hasn't been generous – regardless of what you choose, round it out with a selection of mezze.

Mashy Café (Map p466; Sanafir Hotel; dishes ££35-75) Lebanese is the undisputed king of the Middle Eastern gastronomic world, and this low-key open-air spot outside the Sanafir Hotel is as good a place as any to sample the full bounty of this refined cuisine.

La Rustichella (Map p466; pizza ££25-40, mains ££40-75; ☺) This Sharm institution serves a variety of delectable meals, including Italian-style seafood dishes, brick-oven roasted pizzas, and a good variety of chicken and beef dishes – stop by in the afternoon and cool off with an ice coffee and a creamy gelato.

Tandoori (Map p466; Camel Hotel, King of Bahrain St; dishes ££25-100; ☺ 6.30-11.30pm) This small place in the courtyard of the Camel Hotel has what many consider to be Sharm's best Indian food, including a selection of tandoori dishes and an excellent *dhal makhani* (dish of black lentils and red kidney beans).

Little Buddha (Map p466; Naama Bay Hotel; mains ££45-115; ☺) One of the most popular Asian restaurants in Sharm, the Little Buddha serves excellent Asian fusion cuisine alongside a fresh and varied sushi bar – it's also a lounge bar (below).

Sala Thai (Map p463; Hyatt Regency Sharm el-Sheikh; dishes ££40-120; ☺) Delicious Thai food (fiery curries and delicately spiced noodle dishes) and pleasing aesthetics (teak décor and an outdoor terrace) are yours to enjoy at this comfortable spot overlooking the sea.

Al-Fanar (Map p463; Ras Um Sid; dishes ££40-150; ☺ 10am-10.30pm; ☺) This upscale restaurant boasts an excellent seafront location at the base of the lighthouse, cosy alcoves overlooking the water, Bedouin-influenced décor, indoor and outdoor dining, and a large Italian menu featuring thin-crust pizza and home-made pasta dishes.

Entertainment

With a young resident population and a large number of relatively wealthy tourists, Sharm el-Sheikh has one of Egypt's liveliest bar and club scenes. Drinking starts during the day along the promenade, intensifies during the early evening happy hours and starts to really take off once the sun goes down. Dancing gets going around midnight and ends at dawn, with a fair number of revellers passing out on the sand.

For the most part, nightlife in Sharm is casual – a clean shirt and a pair of decent sandals is perfectly acceptable – though the town's rising prosperity is drawing in greater numbers of the rich and beautiful. With that said, you won't be out of place if you dress to the nines; however, women travellers should keep in mind that they will attract a lot of attention. Egyptian men in Sharm have a penchant for Western women, though the attraction seems to go the other way as well.

Considering that Egypt is a fairly conservative country that typically shuns alcohol and excess pleasures of the flesh, Sharm can either be a shock to the senses or a welcome relief – depending on your own vices, of course. Needless to say, the entire charade is wholly un-Egyptian, but after a few beers and a couple of uninhibited dancing sessions, fun is usually had by all.

Al-Fanar (Map p463; Ras Um Sid) Superb views, drinks nightly and an open-air party dance floor make this one of the most exciting bars around.

Camel Roof Bar (Map p466; Camel Hotel, Na'ama Bay) A favourite among dive instructors, this is the optimal place to start off the evening, especially if you've been diving all day and looking to swap stories from down under.

Hard Rock Café (Map p466; Sultan Qabos St, Na'ama Bay) A late-night disco-bar with dancing, and one of Sharm's most popular nightspots. Dancing starts at midnight and goes until the wee hours of the morn'.

Harry's Pub (Map p466; Marriott Beach Resort, Na'ama Bay) This English pub has a large selection of beers on tap and occasional special nights with unlimited draught beer at a very reasonable price.

La Folie Bar (Map p463; Iberotel Lido, Na'ama Bay; ☺ 2pm-2am) For a more sedate start to your evening, head to this quiet, pleasant bar on the water overlooking the bright lights of Na'ama Bay.

Little Buddha (Map p466; Na'ama Bay Hotel, Na'ama Bay; ☺ 11pm-3am) With dim lights, big, cushiony chairs and a mellow ambience, the bar at this Asian fusion restaurant gets going after the kitchen closes.

Mexicana Bar (Map p466; Na'ama Bay Hotel, Na'ama Bay) A small and sometimes happening bar close to the promenade, this is a great place to down a few bowls of nachos followed by some expertly mixed margaritas.

Pacha (Map p466; Sanafir Hotel, King of Bahrain St, Na'ama Bay) The hub of Sharm's nightlife, the Pacha goes wild pretty much every night of the week. Owner Adli Mestakawi also holds Echo Temple Concerts in the desert outside Sharm on Fridays during the high season (££145), bringing big-name singers to play to audiences of thousands under the stars – watch for Pacha's advertising around town to see what's playing.

Pirates' Bar (Map p466; Hilton Fayrouz Village, Na'ama Bay) A cosy, pub-style bar where divers congregate for an early evening drink or bar meal. Happy hour is from 5.30pm to 7.30pm.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Daily flights to Cairo and Luxor are available with **Egypt Air** (Map p464; ☎ 366 1056; Sharm al-Maya; ☎ 9am-9pm), though prices tend to fluctuate wildly depending on the season and availability. If you book in advance, it is sometimes possible to snag a ticket for as little as ££400, though prices can climb as high as ££1000 during the busy summer and winter holiday seasons.

If you book a package holiday in either the UK or Europe, it's likely that your travel agent will arrange a charter flight directly to Sharm for you. Even if you're an independent traveller, it's worth visiting a few travel agents before booking your ticket to Egypt – charter flights to Sharm are often significantly cheaper than a round-trip airfare to Cairo, and the city is a quick and easy jumping-off point for the Sinai Peninsula, Luxor and the Nile Valley.

BOAT

Tickets for the high-speed ferry to Hurghada from Sharm el-Sheikh can be bought from various travel agencies in town, including **Mena Tours** (Map p466; ☎ 260 0190; Marriott Beach Resort, inland side of Sharm-Na'ama Bay rd, Na'ama Bay). They are also sold at the ferry office (Map p464) at the port on days that the ferry runs. Boats leave from the port west of Sharm al-Maya, and it's best to arrive at the ferry port at least one hour prior to departure.

The ferry to Hurghada departs from Sharm el-Sheikh at 5pm on Monday, Thursday and Saturday and at 3am on Wednesday (one way ££250/US\$40, round trip ££450/US\$70, 1½ hours). The rate of the dollar against the Egyptian pound and the whim of the ferry officials determines which currency you'll need

to use for the Sharm ferry ticket. Also note that the ferry is often cancelled during winter because of windy conditions – if the ferry is likely to be cancelled for a few days, you can then make alternative arrangements to get to Sharm by bus or service taxi.

A few words of caution about the ferry – the Red Sea can get very rough, so much so that the staff on board hands out Dramamine (an antihistamine that can help with seasickness) prior to departure. See p536 for more information. If you've never had the pleasure of witnessing dozens of people simultaneously emptying out their stomach contents, you're in for a memorable trip. With that said, try to get a seat by the window, and keep your eyes fixed on the horizon – this is a great way to beat seasickness. Also note that if the seas are particularly rough, the advertised 1½-hour journey can take as long as three hours.

BUS

The bus station (Map p463) is along the Sharm-Na'ama Bay road behind the Mobil petrol station. Seats on the buses to Cairo should be reserved in advance. Buy tickets from the following bus companies at the bus station.

Superjet (☎ 366 1622, in Cairo 02-290 9017) runs buses to Cairo (££60 to ££70, six hours) at noon, 1pm, 3pm, 5pm and 11pm, with the 3pm bus continuing on to Alexandria (££100, nine hours).

East Delta Travel Company (☎ 366 0660) has buses to Cairo (££60 to ££70, six to eight hours) at 7am, 10am, 11am, noon, 1pm, 2.30pm, 4.30pm and 5.30pm. There are daily buses to Suez (££30 to ££35, five hours) at 7am, 9am and 10am; to Dahab (££15 to ££20, 1¼ hours) and Nuweiba (££20 to ££25, three hours) at 9am, 2.30pm and 5pm; and to Taba (££25 to ££30, 4½ hours) at 9am. A bus to St Katherine's departs at 7.30am (££30, 3½ hours), and a direct bus to Luxor (££110, 12 to 15 hours) via Hurghada leaves at 6pm.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Sharm el-Sheikh International Airport is about 10km north of Na'ama Bay at Ras Nasrany; taxis generally charge from ££20 to ££25 from the airport to Sharm or Na'ama Bay.

BICYCLE

Standard and cross-country bicycles can be rented from stands along the promenade in Na'ama Bay from E£25 per day.

CAR

Car-rental agencies in Na'ama Bay include **Avis** (Map p466; ☎ 360 2400, 360 0979; Sharm-Na'ama Bay rd, Na'ama Bay), just west of Mall 7; **Hertz** (Map p463; ☎ 366 2299; Bank St, Hadaba) and **Sixt Car Rental** (Map p466; ☎ 360 0137; Hilton Fayrouz Village). All charge about US\$80 for a basic saloon, and US\$120 and up for a roomier 4WD. Unlimited kilometre arrangements generally require a minimum three- to four-day rental.

MICROBUS & TAXI

Toyota pick-ups and minibuses regularly ply the stretch between central Na'ama Bay and Sharm el-Sheikh. The going fare is E£2, though foreigners are often charged E£5. Taxis charge a minimum of E£10 between the two centres, and between Hadaba and Na'ama Bay, and from E£5 within Na'ama Bay. Many of the hotels above Ras Um Sid have their own shuttles to Na'ama Bay.

The usual warnings about hitching apply, and women should avoid it completely.

NABQ

Thirty-five kilometres north of Sharm el-Sheikh is Nabq, the largest coastal protectorate on the Gulf of Aqaba. Named after an oasis that lies within its boundaries, Nabq straddles 600 sq km of land and sea between the Strait of Tiran and Dahab. Because it is less frequently visited than Ras Mohammed, Nabq is a good place to see Sinai as it was before the arrival of mass tourism.

There is a **visitors' centre** (admission US\$5; ☎ 8am-5pm) located off the road leading from Sharm el-Sheikh past the airport and Ras Nasrany. Within the park itself, you'll find several hiking trails, clearly marked snorkelling spots and designated camping areas.

Nabq's main attraction is its **mangrove forest**, which is along the shoreline at the mouth of Wadi Kid, and is the most northerly mangrove stand in the world. Mangrove root systems filter most of the salt from sea water, and help to stabilise shorelines, while also providing an important habitat for birds and fish. Just inland from the mangrove forest are the dunes of Wadi Kid, which are home to one of the Middle East's largest stands of **arak bushes**

(arak twigs were traditionally used by Bedouin to clean teeth). Gazelles, rock hyraxes and Nubian ibexes can be seen in the protectorate, as well as two villages of Bedouin from the Mizena tribe. Offshore there are rich reefs with easy access, although visibility can be poor because of sediment from the mangroves.

To visit Nabq, you'll need a vehicle or will have to join an organised tour. Most hotels and resorts in Sharm el-Sheikh and Dahab offer safaris, both on the land and in the water. If you drive, remember that vehicles are strictly forbidden to leave the tracks.

DAHAB

☎ 069

Long hailed as the Koh Samui of the Middle East, Dahab has a long history of luring travellers – and trapping them for days or weeks on end – with its cheap ocean-side camps, golden beaches and rugged mountain backdrop. In recent years Dahab has expanded beyond its humble origins, and now boasts a smooth fusion of hippie mellowness and resort chic. The banana pancakes, moonlight spliffs and hardcore backpackers still remain, though they now coexist with upscale restaurants, boutique hotels and holidaying European families. However, while the vast majority of Sinai is being packaged and sold for mainstream consumption, Dahab is a place where individual travellers are still the rule rather than the exception.

Meaning gold in Arabic, a reference to the area's sandy coastline, Dahab also boasts some of Egypt's most spectacular diving and trekking. A short walk, jeep ride or even camel trek will bring you to some of the Red Sea's most memorable dive sites, and a boat can bring you within easy striking distance of the world-class reefs in nearby Ras Mohammad National Park (p460). Predominantly a Bedouin enclave at its heart, Dahab is also the preferred base for organising guided excursions into the interior deserts, as well as to the lofty heights of nearby Mt Sinai (p492).

Unlike its air-brushed neighbour of Sharm el-Sheikh, Dahab is still trying to maintain its humble roots, determined to find a compromise between the lure of the tourist dollar and its fishing traditions. The balance isn't always easy, but Dahab remains one of the more authentic tourist towns in Egypt. True, a paved boardwalk now lines the beachfront area of Assalah, and the hard

sell for pricey dinners by pushy restaurateurs can quickly test your nerves. However, Dahab remains what it has always been, namely a tranquil ocean-side refuge from the unrelenting heat of the desert. If Dahab is in your sights, be forewarned – after a few days of crystal-clear diving, desert trekking, ocean-side dinners and countless *sheesha* sessions, you're probably going to want to cancel the rest of your itinerary.

Orientation

There are two parts to Dahab: the small and newer area of Dahab City, with a smattering of resort hotels, the bus station, post and phone offices, and a bank; and Assalah, which runs north along the beach and is the major tourist stretch. Assalah is further divided into Masbat and Mashraba. Masbat starts at the southern end of Assalah and is made up of a stretch of 'camps', hotels and laid-back restaurants among the palm trees, as well as a busy little bazaar. To the south, starting roughly at the ruins (currently off limits as an excavation site), is the slightly more staid Mashraba, named after the freshwater springs that apparently exist around the beach. In the centre of Masbat is a small pedestrian bridge, which makes a convenient landmark and is a good place to find taxis.

Information

EMERGENCY

Police (☎ 364 0213/5; Masbat) Near Ghazala Supermarket.

Tourist police (☎ 364 0188; Dahab City)

INTERNET ACCESS

Download.Net (Sharia Al-Mashraba, Mashraba; per hr E£4; ☎ 24hr)

Felopater Internet Cafe (per hr E£5); Masbat (100m south of police station on beachside promenade; ☎ 10am-midnight); Mashraba (Sharia Al-Mashraba, just north of Nesima Resort; ☎ 24hr)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Dahab Hospital (☎ 364 0208; Dahab City)

Dr Sherif Salah (☎ 012 220 8484) Local doctor recommended by most hotels; office at the Hilton Dahab Resort.

MONEY

Banque du Cairo (Sharia Al-Mashraba, Mashraba; ☎ 9am-2pm & 6-9pm Sat-Thu, 9-11am & 6-9pm Fri) Near Inmo Divers Home.

Commercial International Bank ATM (Blue Hole Plaza) About 1.5km northeast of the Hilton Dahab Resort, between the resort strip and Mashraba.

National Bank of Egypt Assalah (just north of Shark Club Restaurant; ☎ 9am-10pm); Dahab City (☎ 9am-2.30pm & 6-8pm Sun-Thu); Swiss Inn Golden Beach Resort (Resort Strip; ☎ 9am-1pm) The Dahab City and Assalah branches each have an ATM.

POST

As well as the main post office, post boxes are also outside Ghazala Supermarket and next to Red Sea Relax Terrace Restaurant, both in Masbat.

Main post office (Dahab City; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm)

TELEPHONE

In addition to the telephone centrale and card-phones, you will find numerous call centres along the beachfront in Assalah where you can dial internationally for a few pounds a minute. Phonecards are sold at the Ghazala Supermarket in Masbat and at most small shops.

Call centre (Masbat; per min E£7; ☎ 10am-3pm & 6-9pm Sat-Thu, 3-9pm Fri)

Telephone centrale (Dahab City; ☎ 24hr)

Dangers & Annoyances

Although Dahab is one of the most relaxed destinations in Egypt, be advised that there is the potential for a future terrorist attack. In April 2006, suicide bombers killed 23 people and injured dozens. Although the government has cracked down on the seeds of Islamic fundamentalism since then, it remains to be seen whether or not their efforts have been effective. However, it is important to emphasise that the overwhelming majority of visitors to Dahab and the greater Sinai enjoy their time immensely, and never experience any sort of problem.

For an overview of the history of terrorism in Sinai, see p457.

It's worth mentioning briefly that Dahab's hippie roots and backpacker-friendly atmosphere go hand in hand with drug use. You will be offered hashish (and possibly harder stuff) wherever you go, and you will see people around you openly using drugs. Although it should go without saying that the penalty for being caught with drugs in Egypt is stiff (to say the least), most tourists have the attitude that hashish is legal – it's not.

The police patrol their drug-sniffing dogs up and down the boardwalk, and are known to bust travellers for smoking dope. Please heed

of Assalah, where a colony of eels lives on the sandy sea bed.

About 6km further north are the **Canyon** and **Blue Hole** dive sites. Despite their intimidating reputation as danger zones for careless divers, the tops of the reefs are teeming with life, making them fine snorkelling destinations when the sea is calm. It's easy to find half-day tours to both sites, but watch for hidden 'extras', such as overpriced drinks and gear-minding fees at some of the cafés around the Blue Hole. Many dive centres also organise snorkelling and dive safaris to the nearby Ras Abu Gallum and Nabq Protectorates (p479 and p472 respectively), as well as overnights to Ras Mohammad National Park (p461).

You can hire snorkelling gear from all the dive centres and many other places in Masbat for about £25 to £40 per day. Keep in mind that some of the reefs have unexpected currents – drownings have occurred in Dahab – so keep your wits about you. And, although this should go without saying, lay off the drinking and drugging if you're going to be in open seas.

For an overview of diving in the Red Sea, including recommended operators and dive sites, see p439.

CAMEL & JEEP SAFARIS

Dahab is one of the best places in Sinai to arrange camel safaris into the dramatic mountains lining the coast, especially the spectacular Ras Abu Gallum Protectorate (p479). When choosing who to go with, try to find a Bedouin – or at least an operator that works with the Bedouin. Unfortunately, local communities have been excluded from the tourist industry, which tends to be dominated by migrants from the Nile Valley. A good place to look is the waterfront in the village, where camel drivers tend to congregate. Register with the police before beginning the safari, and don't pay the camel driver until you return to the village. Itineraries – and as a result prices – are generally custom designed, but expect to pay from £70 per person for an evening trip into the mountains with dinner at a Bedouin camp, and from about £300 per person per day for a safari including all food and water.

Centre for Sinai (☎ 364 0702; www.centre4sinai.com.eg) is one organisation that tries to promote knowledge of the local culture. **Man &**

the Environment Dahab (MATE; ☎ 364 1091; www.mate-dahab.com) is an environmental education group that helps arrange treks with Bedouin guides. Contact both organisations via telephone or email in order to arrange tours around Sinai.

One of the most popular jeep safaris is a trip to **Coloured Canyon**, between St Katherine and Nuweiba. The canyon derives its name from the layers of bright, multicoloured stones that resemble paintings on its steep, narrow walls, and is magnificently beautiful. As the canyon is sheltered from the wind, the silence – assuming you aren't there with crowds of other visitors – is one of its most impressive features. Unfortunately, the canyon has become overtouristed in recent years, and many operators have also begun offering trips to other sites, where the rock formations are equally impressive and the sense of wilderness more intact. All of the hotels, dive centres and travel agencies offer jeep safaris, though prices vary considerably depending on the time of year, your destination and the size of your party – don't be afraid to shop around and bargain hard.

WATER SPORTS

Pedalos, kayaks and jet skis can be rented at the northern end of Masbat and at the holiday villages on the lagoon. Although the golden hills of Saudi Arabia in the distance seem to make for an excellent destination, trust us – you don't want to try to cross. At least one Japanese backpacker we know of managed to touch Saudi soil, only to be rounded up and arrested by some rather unhappy border guards.

Windsurfing is another popular pastime, and the **Hilton Dahab Resort** (☎ 364 0310; www.hilton.com; Resort Strip) and **Swiss Inn Golden Beach Resort** (☎ 364 0054; www.swissinn.net/dahab; Resort Strip) have good windsurfing centres. The centre of the bay boasts the steadiest winds in Dahab, though strong gusts occasionally sweep across the northern end. Kite-surfing is also starting to take off in Dahab, although offshore winds limit the areas where it can be done.

There's no beach to speak of in Assalah itself – instead the rocky coastline leads straight out onto the reef. For the golden sands after which Dahab was named, you'll need to head down to the lagoon area where the resorts are clustered.

HORSE RIDING

If you want to go riding, just wait on the beach in Mashraba for one of the Bedouin who walk up and down with horses for hire. Rates start at about £20 to £40 per hour. You can also ask around the camps. **Blue Beach Club** (☎ 364 0411; reservations@bluebeachclub.com; Assalah) and the **Accor Coral Club Dahab** (☎ 364 0301; www.accorho.tel.com; Resort Strip) can also arrange organised horse-riding excursions.

Sleeping

For a small village perched on the tip of Sinai, Dahab has an incredibly diverse range of accommodation. Most budget travellers head straight for the camps of Assalah, which vary considerably, from Spartan stone, cement or reed huts with a mattress tossed on the floor to attractive backpacker palaces with cushioned seating shaded by palm groves. Generally speaking, long gone are the days of grubby tented camps on the beach. Increased competition has raised the bar in Dahab, and there are some excellent rooms to be had for the price of a decent meal back home.

Dahab's upward push has also resulted in the construction of a good number of mid-range hotels scattered among the budget accommodation in Assalah. And, of course, if you want to enjoy the Dahab vibe in slightly more comfortable surroundings, there are a number of swish boutique hotels and resorts in town, particularly on the beach near Dahab City.

Be advised that the following list is a small sampling of what is available – new places are going up all the time, while older establishments are being knocked down. Also keep in mind that prices are not to be taken at face value – most places drop their prices considerably during the low season, and fixed prices only exist in name in Egypt. If you're looking to arrange any activities, it's best to inquire through your hotel as discounts are readily available for guests.

BUDGET

our pick **Penguin Village** (☎ 364 1047; www.penguindivers.com; Mashraba; r £20-80; 🍷 🍷) This enduring backpacker favourite offers a variety of rooms to suit all budgets – from no-frills fan-cooled concrete boxes to air-con rooms with wooden balconies. Regardless of which room you choose, all guests ultimately congregate in the palm-fringed restaurant, complete with

Bedouin-style pillow lounges overlooking the sea and surf. Whether you desire a dive holiday or a pilgrimage up Sinai, the helpful staff can arrange whatever takes your fancy at a backpacker-friendly price.

Alaska Camp (☎ 364 1004; www.dahabescape.com; Masbat; hammock £15, r £30-90; 🍷 🍷) One of the cheapest accommodation options in town. True backpackers can save a few pounds by stringing up a hammock for a mere £15 a night. Of course, if you're a fan of such conveniences as a roof and four walls, a variety of rooms ranging from Bedouin huts to air-con suites are yours for a bit more a night. Alaska Camp is also the base of Sinai Divers Backpackers, which can help you sort out your dive schedule in no time.

Jasmine Pension (☎ 364 0852; www.jasminepension.com; Mashraba; r £35-120; 🍷 🍷) Located at the southern end of Mashraba, this low-key pension is a good choice for travellers looking for an intimate but affordable spot. Nine pleasantly decorated rooms overlook the beach, and come complete with balconies perfectly suited for quiet reflection. The on-site restaurant is a good choice for sipping a cold Stella while staring at the starry Sinai sky.

Sunsplash Dive Centre (☎ 364 0932; www.sunsplash-divers.com; Mashraba; r £40-120; 🍷 🍷) A friendly German-run dive centre set on its own at the southern end of Mashraba, Sunsplash offers a variety of bungalows and simple but comfortable rooms. Diving is the main attraction on offer here, though the quiet beachfront location is enjoyed by all. There's a good restaurant that offers a healthy mix of Deutschland favourites, as well as the obligatory beachside lounge area.

Bishbishi Village Garden Camp (☎ 364 0727; www.bishbishi.com; Sharia Al-Mashraba, Mashraba; r £50-150; 🍷 🍷) Another classic backpacker spot, Bishbishi is a long-standing camp that is set back from the sea on the street parallel to the waterfront. Although you're not directly on the sea, there is an appealing air of privacy to the property. And, of course, this is a great place to meet other backpackers, particularly while sitting in the Bedouin-style lounge area surrounding a fire pit.

Sphinx Hotel (☎ 548 8708; www.sphinxdahab.com; Mashraba; r £85-165; 🍷 🍷) One of the most popular hotels in Dahab, the Sphinx follows a simple formula: offer sparkling rooms with modern amenities and ocean views, and the crowds will come. Of course, it's hard to keep

people away when you're attached to one of the best restaurants around, namely the Funny Mummy (p478), which is the perfect spot for a sundown smoke (*sheesha*, of course!). The on-site dive centre also gets good reviews, as does the small but professional massage centre.

MIDRANGE

Seven Heaven Hotel (☎ 364 0080; www.7heavenhotel.com; Masbat; r US\$25-35; 🏠 📺 🚿) This pleasant family-run hotel consists of bright and airy rooms with private modern and tiled bathrooms. Although not as upscale as other midrange options, it's a good place to be if you're looking for a bit of privacy without breaking the bank. The on-site 'Divers Down Under' dive centre can help you get wet within hours of arrival.

Bamboo House Hotel (☎ 364 0263; bamboohousehotel@hotmail.com; Masbat; r US\$25-40; 🏠 📺 🚿) Centrally located near the bridge in Masbat, this Asian-themed hotel is styled in cool, crisp lines and soft, pastel colours. The largish rooms positively lighten up when the sun is shining, and are, needless to say, heavy on the bamboo. Although it's lacking the community feeling found at other hotels, it's a good spot if you want to unwind in your own room.

Red Sea Relax (☎ 364 1309; www.red-sea-relax.com; Masbat; r US\$25-45; 🏠 📺 🚿) Located near the bridge in Masbat, this intimate hotel offers a variety of rooms ranging from subdued ensuite rooms decked out in soft blues to vibrant ocean-facing suites awash in bright, tropical colours. Ease your mind with a fruit smoothie on the rooftop terrace, or relax your body with a cold beer and a game of pool. Or escape the hotel altogether by booking a dive through the on-site centre.

Inmo Hotel (☎ 364 0370; www.inmodivers.de; Mashraba; r US\$25-65; 🏠 📺 🚿) With colourful rooms, domed ceilings and attractive furniture, this well-run, family-friendly hotel mainly caters to people on diving packages from Europe. With a presence in Dahab dating back over 20 years, Inmo has a well-established reputation in town, especially when it comes to its highly recommended dive shop. Guests can also take advantage of the owners' knowledge of the Bedouin community, which makes for some memorable custom-tailored desert trips.

Christina Beach Palace & Christina Residence (☎ Beach Palace 364 0390, Residence 364 0406; www.christinahotels.com; Mashraba; r US\$50-75; 🏠 📺 🚿)

These small Swiss-run hotels offer a degree of European sophistication that is matched by few other hotels in Dahab. Both hotels offer classically designed rooms – with just a touch of Arabic architectural accents – that boast modern amenities and luxurious bathrooms. Depending on your preference, the Christina Beach Palace is on the beach, while the Christina Residence is just inland.

Nesima Resort (☎ 364 0320; www.nesima-resort.com; Mashraba; r US\$55-105; 🏠 📺 🚿) Overlooking the beach in Mashraba, this modest resort is a compromise for those who want resort living without feeling as if you're isolated from the town. With pleasing stone and wood overtones and soaring domes, rooms at Nesima induce calm, relaxed feelings for all who stay here. One of the most attractive features is its palm-fringed infinity-edge pool, which overlooks the beach and the boardwalk.

TOP END

All of the following hotels occasionally offer discounted rates if you book in advance via the internet.

Accor Coralina Club Dahab (☎ 364 0301; www.accorhotels.com; Resort Strip; r from US\$75; 🏠 📺 🚿) One of the most affordable top-end hotels in Dahab, this branch of the Accor Coralina chain offers 140 rooms of varying sizes, shapes and views. Set on 650m of sandy beach, the Club Dahab is one of the few hotels in town where you can lie out on a sandy beach to your heart's content. True to its resort moniker, the hotel is brimming with amenities, including a dive centre, pool complex, spa, and a whole slew of bars and restaurants.

Swiss Inn Golden Beach Resort (☎ 364 0054; www.swissinn.net/dahab; Resort Strip; r from US\$85; 🏠 📺 🚿) This family-friendly four-star resort has well-appointed rooms and a pleasantly unpretentious ambience. Entire days can be spent lounging around the flower-fringed pool and stunning stretch of golden sand, though there's always the on-site dive and windsurfing centre if you want to get active. The Swiss Inn is home to a number of recommendable restaurants, including a pleasant poolside café and a European-inspired bistro.

Hilton Dahab Resort (☎ 364 0310; www.hilton.com; Resort Strip; r from US\$115; 🏠 📺 🚿) The five-star Hilton is the big boy on the block and easily the swankiest hotel in the Dahab area. Though it's more subdued than some of its flashier cousins around the world, the whitewashed,

domed two-storey villas are still a class act. On offer are two pools, an immaculate beach, a play area for children and a full range of water sports, including a highly professional dive centre.

Eating

The waterfront in Assalah is lined with restaurants, the majority of which are Bedouin-style beachfront seating areas where you can relax on cushions while gazing out over the sparkling waters of the Gulf of Aqaba. Seafood is on almost all menus, together with a good selection of pizza, pasta, meat and vegetarian dishes. And, of course, all places serve the requisite apple *sheesha* and mint tea, perfect for chilling out and letting Dahab work its magic on you. Although we haven't listed any specific places to eat in the Assalah area, it's not too hard to find a good spot by simply following your nose.

For self-caterers, there are numerous supermarkets dotted around Assalah, including the **Ghazala Supermarket** (Masbat; ☎ 8am-2am), near the main junction at the southern end of Masbat.

Kushari House (Sharia Al-Mashraba; meals ££3-5) For the cheapest meal in town, head to the back streets where you can get a large bowl of kushari, that wholly unique Egyptian creation reminiscent of mum's leftovers.

Gado Restaurant (Sharia Al-Mashraba; meals ££5-15) We don't know how it's possible to serve such generous portions of hearty cuisine at these prices, but we do know that the traditional Egyptian fare at Gado is damn good, and worth every pound.

King Chicken (Sharia Al-Mashraba; meals ££10-15) Half a chicken with rice and all the trimmings can be yours at this local favourite, which lures in penny-pinching backpackers in the know.

Al-Hussein (Sharia Al-Mashraba; meals ££15-30) If you want to sample Dahab's legendary seafood without paying tourist prices, this local spot offers the same cuisine you'll find along the waterfront at one-third the price.

Jay's Restaurant (Masbat; dishes ££25-40) A Dahab institution serving a mixture of Egyptian and Western fare at very reasonable prices – the menu changes weekly, and dishes such as coconut rice and curried vegetables make a welcome change from the usual offerings.

Tota Restaurant (Masbat; dishes ££25-60) This unmissable boat-shaped bar (right) in the heart of Assalah also serves decent Italian cuisine,

including large pizzas and pasta dishes, as well as a range of other meals and desserts.

Nirvana Indian Restaurant (☎ 364 1261; Masbat; dishes ££25-65) Dahab's best Indian food will please vegetarians and carnivores alike, especially if you're a fan of spicy curries, fluffy rice pilaffs and flaky naan.

Carm Inn (Masbat; dishes ££25-65) This waterfront place is a favourite of local dive instructors, with a varied menu of Western, Indian and Indonesian dishes served in mellow surroundings with a hint of the South Pacific.

Funny Mummy (Mashraba; dishes ££35-85) One of the most popular restaurants on the boardwalk, this palm-fringed and pillow-decked spot offers all of your favourite Western and Asian dishes alongside traditional Egyptian delicacies.

Penguin Restaurant (Mashraba; dishes ££35-85) A traveller favourite, the ocean-side restaurant at this backpacker hotel serves an eclectic menu ranging from banana pancakes and English fry-ups in the morning to Thai curries and Italian pasta dishes in the evening.

Lakhbatita (Mashraba; dishes ££30-100) This eccentric beachfront establishment at the southern end of Mashraba is decorated with old Egyptian furniture, and serves gourmet food drawing on Egyptian, Middle Eastern, Asian and Continental influences.

Entertainment

In comparison with Hurgada and Sharm el-Sheikh and, Dahab is fairly quiet at night, but there is a good selection of lively bars, some of which turn into discos if the atmosphere is right. Of course, after a long day of diving and desert exploration, most travellers are content with sprawling out in any of Dahab's waterfront restaurants and nursing a few cold Stellas.

Crazy House (Masbat) Housed in a historic two-storey wooden building, the Crazy House serves cheap beer, and there's even a billiard table – what more do you need?

Shipwreck Bar (Nesima Resort, Mashraba) A popular rooftop bar with great views over the sea, which attracts a sophisticated crowd with its daily happy-hour specials.

Tota Dance Bar (Masbat) The centre of nightlife in Dahab, this nautically themed drinking spot has free movies from Sunday to Thursday, and turns into an impromptu disco on Friday and Saturday nights – the top deck is a good place to watch the sunset while sip-

ping a cold beer, especially during the 5pm to 7pm happy hour.

Getting There & Away

BUS

With its new station in Dahab City, well south-west of the centre of the action, **East Delta Travel Company** (☎ 364 1808; Dahab City) has buses to Sharm el-Sheikh (E£15 to E£20, 1½ hours) departing at 8am, 8.30am, 10am, 11.30am, 12.30pm, 2.30pm, 4pm, 5.30pm, 8.30pm and 10pm. Buses to Nuweiba (E£10 to E£15, one hour) leave at 8.30am and 10.30am, with the 10.30am bus continuing on to Taba (E£20, two hours). There is a 9.30am bus to St Katherine (E£20 to E£25, 2½ hours). Buses heading to Cairo (E£67 to E£80, nine hours) depart at 8.30am, 12.30pm, 2.30pm and 7.30pm. Buses for Suez (E£45 to E£450, 6½ hours) depart at 8am and 4pm. There is also a daily direct bus to Luxor (E£120, 15 to 18 hours) departing at 4pm, which, while long, is a faster and less expensive option than going via Hurgada on a combination of bus and ferry. Most hotels and camps can arrange your bus tickets for you, plus transport to the bus station, for about E£10 to E£15 extra.

SERVICE TAXI

Service taxis are generally more expensive than buses, and as travellers are a captive market, there's usually not much room for negotiation. Per-person rates (multiply these by seven to charter an entire taxi) average about E£30 to St Katherine, Nuweiba or Sharm el-Sheikh.

Getting Around

Pick-ups and minibuses go up and down the main street in Assalah and, less frequently, around the resort strip. The usual fare is E£1 for around town, and E£3 if you find one doing the entire stretch between Assalah and Dahab City. In addition to a handful of taxis, a minibus usually meets incoming buses at the East Delta Travel Company's Dahab City station and goes up to Assalah. Departing from Assalah, you'll need to rely on taxis to get to the bus station (E£5 to E£10).

Max Car Rental (☎ 364 0310; maxrent@max.com.eg) has a branch at the Hilton Dahab Resort.

RAS ABU GALLUM PROTECTORATE

The starkly beautiful Ras Abu Gallum Protectorate covers 400 sq km of coastline between Dahab and Nuweiba, mixing coastal

mountains, narrow valleys, sand dunes and fine gravel beaches with several excellent diving and snorkelling sites. Scientists describe the area as a 'floristic frontier', in which Mediterranean conditions are influenced by a tropical climate. This, together with its 165 plant species (including 44 that are found nowhere else in Sinai) and wealth of mammals and reptiles, gives it great environmental importance and makes it a fascinating place to visit.

As in nearby Nabq, Bedouin of the Mizena tribe live within the protectorate confines, fishing here as they have done for centuries (although this is now regulated by the protectorate). There is a designated camping area and several walking trails, and you can hire Bedouin guides and camels through the ranger house at the edge of **Wadi Rasasah**. Otherwise, there are no facilities and no visitors' centre. Popular destinations within the protectorate include **Bir el-Oghda**, a now-deserted Bedouin village, and **Bir Sugheir**, a water source at the edge of the protectorate.

Dive centres and travel agencies in Nuweiba and Dahab offer camel and jeep excursions to Abu Gallum, often as part of a diving safari. Abanoub Travel (p481) is also a good contact for arranging a visit. If you are driving, remember that all vehicles should stick to the tracks. The entry track off the main highway is unsignposted. The protectorate can also be reached by hiking in from north of the Blue Hole near Dahab.

NUWEIBA

☎ 069

Turquoise waters edged by fine, sandy beaches and rimmed on both sides by barren, rugged mountain chains give Nuweiba one of the most attractive settings among Sinai's resort towns. Stretched randomly over about 15km, however, Nuweiba lacks a defined centre and a cohesive ambience, and functions primarily as a port town rather than a travellers' retreat. As a result, Nuweiba has never managed to attract the cult following of nearby Dahab or the massive development of Sharm el-Sheikh. Indeed, most travellers pass through Nuweiba either on their way to the scenic camps and resorts further up the coast, or to catch the Aqaba-bound ferry en route to Petra in Jordan.

Yet the lack of crowds gives Nuweiba its own appeal, and the town makes a reasonable stop if you're working your way up or down the coast. Nuweiba is also a good place to organise

THE BEDOUIN OF SINAI

Sinai's rugged tracts are home to the Bedouin (desert dwellers), most of whom live in the north of the peninsula. The Bedouin – whose numbers are variously estimated to be between 80,000 and 300,000 – belong to 14 distinct tribes, most with ties to Bedouin in the Negev, Jordan and northern Saudi Arabia, and each with their own customs and culture. The Sukwarka, who live along the northern coast near Al-Arish, are the largest tribe. Others include the Tarabin, who have territory in both northern and southern Sinai; the Tyaha in the centre of the peninsula who, together with the Tarabin, trace their roots to Palestine; and the Haweitat, centred in an area southeast of Suez, and originally from the Hejaz in Saudi Arabia.

The seven Bedouin tribes in southern Sinai are known collectively as the Towara or 'Arabs of Al-Tor', the provincial capital. Of these southern Bedouin, the first to settle in Sinai were the Aleiqat and the Suwalha, who arrived soon after the Muslim conquest of Egypt. The largest southern tribe is the Mizena, who are concentrated along the coast between Sharm el-Sheikh and Nuweiba. Members of the tiny Jabaliyya tribe, centred in the mountains around St Katherine, are descendants of Macedonians sent by the Emperor Justinian to build and protect the monastery in the 6th century.

Thanks to centuries of living in the harsh conditions of Sinai, the Bedouin have developed a sophisticated understanding of their environment. Strict laws and traditions govern the use of precious resources. Water use is closely regulated and vegetation carefully conserved, as revealed in the Bedouin adage, 'killing a tree is like killing a soul'. Local life centres around clans and their sheikhs (leaders), and loyalty and hospitality – essential for surviving in the desert – are paramount. Tea is traditionally taken in rounds of three, and traditional dwellings are tents made of woven goat hair, sometimes mixed with sheep wool. Women's black veils and robes are often elaborately embroidered, with red signifying that they are married, and blue unmarried. Despite their long history and immense knowledge of the peninsula, Sinai's original inhabitants are often left behind in the race to build up the coast. They are sometimes viewed with distrust because of their ties to tribes in neighbouring countries, especially Israel & the Palestinian Territories, and their strong traditions, respect for their environment and proud nomadic past are often given short shrift by Nile Valley dwellers, many of whom treat the peninsula as a gold mine to be exploited. With their coastal landholdings sold out from under them by the state, their fishing grounds polluted by uncontrolled development and their nomadic past often turned into a caricature of packaged camel rides and desert dinners, the Bedouin have become increasingly marginalised in their own land.

In recent years persecution of the Bedouin has sadly increased, particularly in light of their perceived involvement in terrorist cells throughout the Sinai. Although a few misguided individuals were involved in the 2006 Dahab bombings, the government has relentlessly pursued convictions of Bedouins, particularly in Northern Sinai. Fortunately, however, the news isn't all bad – on the contrary, the Bedouin are arguably more organised and unified than they have ever been. This is evident in their recent formation of cooperatives whose aims are to grant the greater community sustained economic independence, and to ensure that their traditional desert environment is protected.

Throughout the world – and especially in Egypt – tourism has the power to shape the destinies of communities. As an informed traveller, you, too, can do your part: frequent Bedouin-owned businesses, always buy locally, stay informed of prevalent issues and never be afraid to ask questions.

jeep and camel safaris into the interior, and its modest diving scene means that its offshore reefs are comparatively uncrowded. Although it's perhaps not a tourist destination in itself, a number of low-key resorts and backpacker-friendly camps make Nuweiba a pleasant enough place to spend a few days.

History

During the Israeli occupation, Nuweiba was the site of a large *moshav* (farming settlement), which has since been converted into a residence for Egyptian government officials. In the 1990s Israelis formed the bulk of the tourist trade, but the vagaries of the regional

political situation over the past decade and the fallout from the Iraq war have forced many new tourism projects to a halt. Today the outskirts of Nuweiba and the coastline north to Taba is littered with the shells of half-built resorts.

Orientation

Nuweiba is divided into three parts: to the south is the port, with a bus station, banks and a couple of scruffy hotels; about 8km further north is Nuweiba City, a small but spread-out settlement with a variety of accommodation options, a small bazaar and several cheap places to eat; and about a 10-minute walk north along the beach is Tarabin, Nuweiba's equivalent of Dahab's Assalah area.

Information

EMERGENCY

Tourist police Nuweiba City (☎ 350 0231; near Nuweiba Village hotel; 🕒 24hr); Nuweiba Port (☎ 350 0401)

INTERNET ACCESS

Al-Mostakbal Internet Café (☎ 350 0090; Nuweiba City; per hr ££6; 🕒 9am-3am)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Nuweiba Hospital (☎ 350 0302; Nuweiba City; 🕒 24hr) Just off the Main East Coast Highway to Dahab.

MONEY

Neither of the banks at the port will handle Jordanian dinars.

Banque du Caire (Nuweiba Port; 🕒 9am-2pm Sun-Thu) Has an ATM.

Banque Misr (Nuweiba Port; 🕒 8.30am-2pm Sun-Thu) Has an ATM.

National Bank of Egypt Nuweiba Port (🕒 8.30am-2pm Sun-Thu); Nuweiba Village (🕒 9am-1pm & 7-9pm Sat-Thu, 9-11am Fri) Both branches have an ATM.

POST

Branch post office (Nuweiba Port; 🕒 8.30am-2.30pm Sun-Thu)

Main post office (Nuweiba City; 🕒 8.30am-2.30pm Sun-Thu)

TELEPHONE

Telephone centrale (Nuweiba City; 🕒 24hr)

Activities

SNORKELLING & DIVING

Underwater delights are the feature attraction of Nuweiba, and while not as dramatic as at

other resorts on the Gulf of Aqaba, the dive sites tend to be less busy, with an impressive variety of marine life. There are shallow reefs offshore that are reasonable places to snorkel, but the best snorkelling is the **Stone House Reef** just south of town. Divers sometimes head to nearby Ras Abu Gallum (p479), Ras Mohammed National Park (p461) or other offshore destinations – many of which are also fine for snorkellers – though most diving here is shore based.

For an overview of diving in the Red Sea, including recommended operators and dive sites, see p439.

CAMEL & JEEP SAFARIS

With the exception of Dahab, Nuweiba is the best place in Sinai to arrange camel safaris into the interior. When planning your trip, keep in mind that camels are a slower and – if budget is a worry – more expensive way of travelling. However, they allow you to reach places that are inaccessible to vehicles, and are the best way to see the area. Almost every camp and shop in Tarabin offers these trips, but take care that whoever you pick is a local Bedouin – not only are they marginalised by tour operators from the Nile Valley and therefore need the work, but there have been some instances of travellers lost in the desert without water because their so-called guides didn't know the routes.

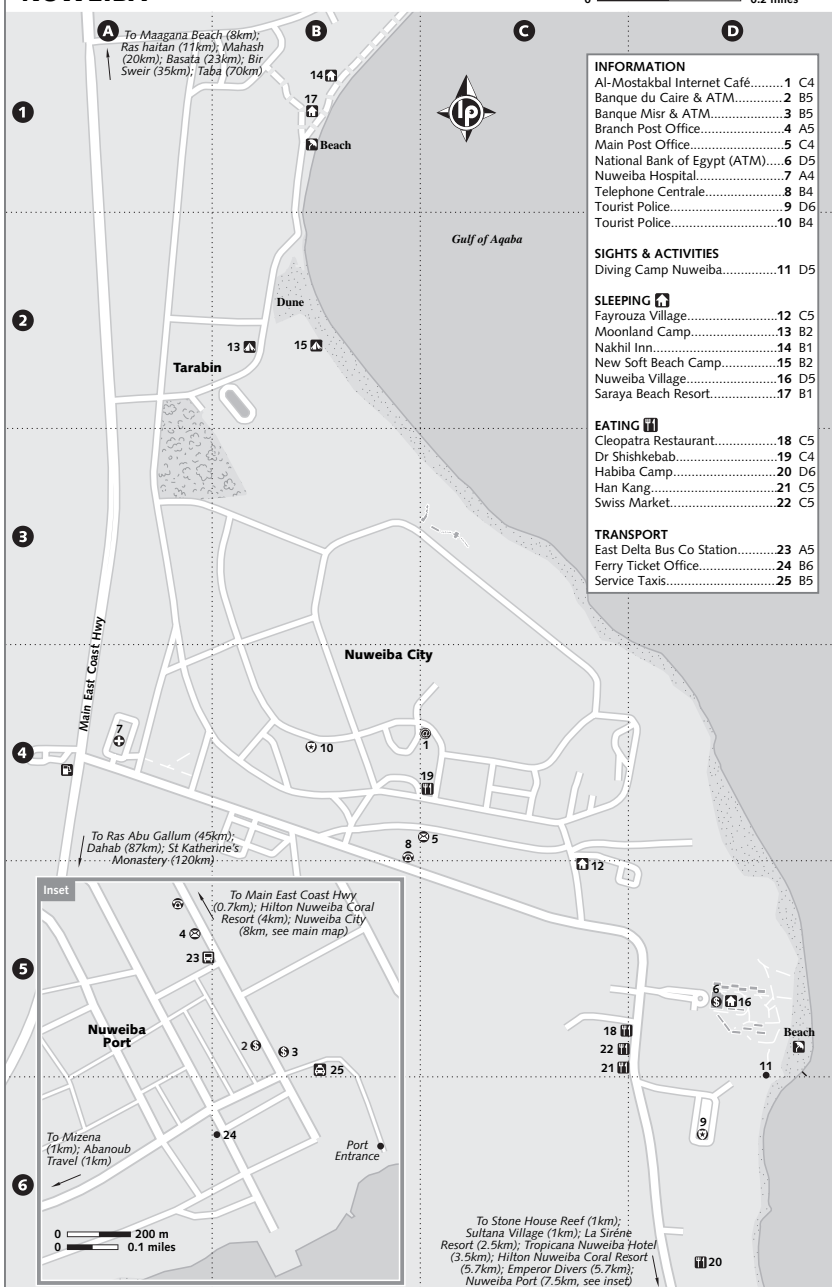
Register with the police before beginning the safari, and don't pay the camel driver until you return to the village. Itineraries – and as a result prices – are generally custom designed, but expect to pay from ££70 per person for an evening trip into the mountains with dinner at a Bedouin camp, and from about ££300 per person per day for a safari including all food and water.

All of the camps and shops also offer jeep safaris, though prices vary considerably depending on the time of year, your destination and the size of your party – don't be afraid to shop around and bargain hard.

In addition to trips to the popular Coloured Canyon (see p475 for more information), other popular destinations are **Ain al-Furtega**, a palm-filled oasis 16km northwest of Nuweiba; and **Mayat el-Wishwashi**, a large cistern hidden between two boulders in a canyon – it used to be the largest cistern in Sinai, but now has only a trickle of water, except after floods. Nearby is **Mayat Malkha**, a palm grove fed by

NUWEIBA

0 400 m
0 0.2 miles



the waters of Mayat el-Wishwashi and set amid colourful sandstone.

Wadi Huweiyit is an impressive sandstone canyon with lookouts giving panoramic views over to Saudi Arabia. **Ain Hudra** (Green Spring) is where Miriam was supposed to have been struck by leprosy for criticising Moses. The picturesque **Ain Umm Ahmed** is the largest oasis in eastern Sinai, with lots of palms, Bedouin houses and a famous stream that becomes an icy river in the winter months.

Further afield, **Wadi Sheikh Atiya** is named after the father of the Tarabin tribe – the largest tribe in the area – who lies buried here under a white dome. There is an oasis here and Bedouin frequently come on pilgrimage. **Gebel Barga** is a mountain that is difficult to climb, yet affords stunning views over the mountains of eastern Sinai.

Sleeping

Nuweiba City is the area's principal population centre, and home to a collection of mostly midrange hotels plus a few low-key backpackers' camps. Since Nuweiba primarily serves as a port city, this area is sprawling and decidedly lacking in character – getting around can be a pain, so it's best to grab a taxi and choose a camp instead of going door to door looking for the best price. However, there are a few decent accommodation options here, and it's a convenient place to spend the night if you're catching the ferry to Jordan the following day.

Most backpackers and independent travellers prefer Tarabin, which is essentially a pedestrian-only boardwalk that stretches along the waterfront for 1.5km. In years gone by, Tarabin hosted a laid-back bohemian scene that rivalled Dahab in popularity. Unfortunately, however, Nuweiba has been badly hit by the lack of Israeli tourists since the resurgence of the *intifada* (the Palestinian uprising against Israeli authorities). Today Tarabin is very quiet, although it continues to attract a trickle of visitors. While many of the original camps have either closed or gone upscale, it's still possible to find a number of interesting spots.

Be advised that the following list is a small sampling of what is available – the establishments listed are well-established spots that have weathered the storm in light of decreasing tourism. Also keep in mind that prices are not to be taken at face value – most rooms

are subject to bargaining, especially if there aren't too many tourists in town. If you also want to arrange activities, it's best to inquire through your hotel as discounts are readily available for guests.

BUDGET

New Soft Beach Camp (☎ 010 364 7586; www.softbeachcamp.com; huts from E£20; 📶) Located at the quieter end of Tarabin near the dunes, the New Soft Beach has one of the best settings in Nuweiba. The camp consists of rustic but picturesque huts with communal outdoor showers and attractive gardens. There is also a good restaurant on the premises where you can sample some local Bedouin favourites.

Moonland Camp (☎ 350 1229; huts from E£20; 📶) A popular backpacker spot, the Moonland Camp is a few minutes' walk north of Soft Beach at the southern end of Tarabin. Like Soft Beach, accommodation is in a collection of huts built around communal showers and a small restaurant. Though the compound is somewhat closed in and set back from the beach, the friendly management works hard to create a relaxed, communal atmosphere.

Fayrouza Village (☎ 350 1133; fayrouza@sinai4you.com; huts from E£20) Yet another popular camp, the Fayrouza Village stands out with its location on the beach at the edge of Nuweiba City and in front of a reef. Like the competition, the camp consists of simple but spotless huts overlooking the water, communal bathrooms and a small restaurant serving filling, tasty meals. If you're arriving in Nuweiba by bus, ask to be dropped off at the hospital, from where it's a 10-minute walk down to Fayrouza.

Saraya Beach Resort (☎ 350 1230; huts from E£20, r from E£150; 📶) Located north of Moonland in the heart of Tarabin, this resort is more of a backpacker camp despite its fancy name. Still, if you're looking for camp ambience and the privacy of a hotel room, its air-con rooms offer good value. Although the Saraya isn't as scenically located as the New Soft Beach and the Moonland, you're right in the centre of the action here.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Nuweiba Village (☎ 350 0401; www.nuweibaresort.com; s/d huts from US\$15/20, r from US\$40; 📶 📺 📶) The Nuweiba Village is a good choice for most budgets – the main hotel area consists of a collection of attached bungalow-style rooms overlooking a central garden area, while

nearby on the beach is a collection of closely spaced wooden huts with shared facilities. Regardless of which room you choose, all guests can take advantage of the three-star amenities, including an attractive pool and a well-stocked water-sports centre. The Village is located at the southern end of Nuweiba City off the main coastal road.

Nakhil Inn (☎ 350 0879; www.nakhil-inn.com; r from US\$40; 🏠) At the northern end of Tarabin is this charming inn, which consists of attached wooden bungalows fronting a large patio area. Rooms are a soothing mix of stained woods and natural tiles, and are a pleasant alternative to much of the concrete that lines the beachfronts in Egypt. Guests can also take advantage of the on-site yoga studio, which will put you in the right mood to enjoy the relaxing ambience of Nuweiba.

Tropicana Nuweiba Hotel (☎ 352 1056; www.tropicana-hotels.com; r from US\$60; 🏠 📺 📺) Located along the coastal road, this four-star hotel offers excellent value, especially considering that it fronts a superb stretch of sandy beach, and it's well landscaped with lush greenery. Rooms of varying shapes and sizes are housed in an attractive whitewashed building, and overlook the deep-blue hues of the Red Sea. Guests can also unwind by the pool, or in any of the Tropicana's inviting restaurants and bars.

Hilton Nuweiba Coral Resort (☎ 352 0320; www.hiltonworldresorts.com; Nuweiba Port; r from US\$100; 🏠 📺 📺) Nuweiba's most sophisticated hotel is this immaculate resort, which boasts lush gardens, a free-form infinity pool, posh restaurants and bars, a private stretch of soft sand and all the usual five-star amenities. Accommodation is in a variety of rooms ranging from contemporary designs with Western-style furnishings to whitewashed bungalows with Bedouin-style interiors. It's located about 2.5km south of the Tropicana, and about 4km via road from the port area.

Eating

At the port there is a cluster of *fuul* and *ta'amiyya* places in the area behind the National Bank of Egypt and before the ticket office for Aqaba ferries. If you'd prefer a bit more than a quick bite, however, the selection is much better in and around Nuweiba City, where you have a choice of several small eateries or the hotel restaurants. If you're out in Tarabin, you'll probably take most of your meals at your camp or hotel – most of

the camps also have self-catering facilities if you're cooking your own grub.

Swiss Market (Nuweiba City) Self-caterers can try this popular local market, which has a good selection of the basics, as well as a decent stock of local produce and fresh cuts of meat.

Dr Shishkebab (Bazaar Nuweiba City; dishes E£10-30) This place is just what the doctor ordered, with generous spreads of Egyptian favourites from hearty fried eggplant and hummus to delectable *daoud basha* (meatballs in a rich tomato sauce).

Han Kang (Nuweiba City; dishes E£20-40) Although you're a long way from the Far East, this surprisingly good Chinese restaurant hits the spot, especially if you've been on the road for awhile and can't bear to look at another falafel sandwich.

Cleopatra Restaurant (Nuweiba City; dishes E£20-50) One of the more popular tourist restaurants in Nuweiba City, this eclectic spot offers up the bounty of the sea, Lebanese-inspired mezze platters, wood-fired pizzas and a few Western fast-food favourites.

Habiba Camp (Nuweiba City; buffet from E£50) If you want value for your money, look no further than this all-you-can-eat spot, which offers an especially good buffet lunch – pack in the calories and then spend the afternoon burning them off on a trek (or simply lazing about on the beach).

Getting There & Away

BOAT

There's an excellent fast-ferry service between Nuweiba in Egypt and Aqaba in Jordan, leaving Nuweiba at 3pm and taking one hour to two hours depending on sea conditions. Heading back to Nuweiba, fast ferries depart from Aqaba at 11am. One-way tickets cost US\$59 for adults and US\$39 for children aged three to 12 years. You must be at the port two hours before departure to get through the shambolic departure formalities in the main ferry terminal building.

Note that there's also a slow ferry (adult/child US\$49/29, 2½ hours) leaving at noon daily, though we can't stress how much more comfortable it is to shell out the extra US\$10 and take the fast ferry.

Tickets must be paid for in US dollars (note that these are not always available at the banks in Nuweiba) and can be purchased on the day of departure only at the **ferry ticket office** (☎ 9am), in a small building near the port.

Note that the only exception to this rule is during the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) when boats are booked weeks prior to departure. During this period, it's necessary to buy your ticket as far in advance as possible.

To find the ticket office, turn right when you exit the bus station, walking towards the water, and turn right again after the National Bank of Egypt. Continue along one block, and you'll see the sand-coloured ticket office building ahead to your left. The office stops selling tickets approximately one hour before the ferry leaves.

Free Jordanian visas can be obtained on the ferry if you have an EU, US, Canadian, Australian or New Zealand passport. Fill out a green form on board, give it and your passport to the immigration officers and – hey presto – you can collect your passport and visa when you pass through Jordanian immigration at Aqaba. Other nationalities will need to organise a visa in advance.

BUS

East Delta Bus Co (☎ 352 0371; Nuweiba Port) has buses to Cairo (££70 to ££80, seven to eight hours) at 9am, 11am and 3pm going via Taba (££15 to ££20, one hour); and to Sharm el-Sheikh (££20 to ££25, three hours) at 6.30am, 8.30am, 10am and 4pm going via Dahab (££10 to ££15, one hour). There is a bus to Suez (££45 to ££50, four hours) at 6.30am, and an inconvenient connection from Nuweiba to St Katherine via Dahab departing at 8.30am (££22).

SERVICE TAXI

There is a service-taxi station by the port, but unless you get there when the ferry has arrived from Aqaba, you'll have to wait a long time for the car to fill up. Per-person fares (multiply by seven for the entire car) average about ££30 to Sharm el-Sheikh, ££15 to Dahab and ££60 to Cairo (usually changing vehicles in Suez). It's also possible to find service taxis at the outskirts of Tarabin that will take you directly out on the road north towards Taba or south to Dahab, St Katherine's Monastery or Sharm el-Sheikh.

Getting Around

Since Nuweiba is so spread out, taxis are expensive. Expect to pay ££10 to ££20 for a taxi from the port/bus station to Nuweiba City, depending on your destination and negotiating powers, and from ££5 for the few kilometres between Tarabin and Nuweiba City.

If you're arriving in Nuweiba by bus, you can usually ask to be dropped at the hospital, from where you can walk to Fayrouza Village and nearby camps/hotels.

NUWEIBA TO TABA

☎ 069

The stunning coastline between Nuweiba and Taba is fringed by aqua waters and rimmed by chains of low, barren mountains. While there are a few pristine spots left, much of it is lined by a string of 'tourist villages' in various stages of completion, interspersed with simple beach camps consisting of reed huts and an eating area. Many of these camps sprung up when the local Bedouin were forced off their land to make way for hotel and resort development, and have since grown into what the Ministry of Tourism terms 'clusters'.

Business, which traditionally has come primarily from visiting Israelis, has suffered greatly with the political turmoil of recent years, and you'll frequently have much of the coastline to yourself. As a result, at most places there's nothing much to do other than relax on the sands while gazing out at the turquoise panoramas stretching before you, or – if you're feeling energetic – organise camel and jeep safaris to the interior.

If you're debating whether or not to stop at any of the places listed here, it's worth asking yourself what kind of traveller you are. If you need constant stimulation, you're likely to go a bit stir-crazy. However, if you want to seriously slow things down, and spend some quality time with an interesting cast of characters, the Nuweiba–Taba coastline will appeal immensely.

Orientation & Information

Approximately 50km of well-paved coastal highway connects Nuweiba with its northerly neighbour of Taba. About 20km south of Taba is the massive new **Taba Heights development** (www.tabaheights.com), one of the lynchpins in Egyptian efforts to create a 'Red Sea Riviera'. When it's finally complete, it will house several luxury hotels, a casino, numerous shops, bars and restaurants, a medical clinic and extensive water-sports facilities. For now, much of the area is still under construction, although a few resorts are open.

The closest places to change money, or to stock up if you want to self-cater, are (unsurprisingly) Taba and Nuweiba.

LONELY PLANET JORDAN (ABRIDGED)

Planning a brief excursion to Jordan? Wishing you had a bit of info on the ancient city of Petra? Here's a quick guide to one of the 'New Seven Wonders of the World'.

PETRA

Hewn from towering rock walls of multicoloured sandstone, the imposing façades of its great temples and tombs are an enduring testament to the vision of the desert tribes who sculpted them. The Nabataeans – Arabs who dominated the region in pre-Roman times – chose as their capital a place concealed from the outside world, and fashioned it into one of the Middle East's most remarkable cities. Almost as spectacular as the monuments themselves are the countless shades and Neapolitan swirls formed in the rock. Petra is often called the 'Rose-Red City', but even this hardly does justice to the extraordinary range of colours that blend as the sun makes its daily passage over the site.

Orientation & Information

The base town for exploring Petra is Wadi Musa (Valley of Moses), a patchy mass of hotels, restaurants and shops located about 3km from the **visitors' centre** (☎ 3-215 6020; 🕒 6am-5.30pm May-Sep, 6.30am-5pm Oct-Apr). Entry fees are JD21/26/31 for one-/two-/three-day passes. Note that at the time of publication, one Jordanian Dinar (JD) was approximately equal to US\$1.42 and ££7.83.

Sights & Activities

The ancient city is approached via the **Siq**, a canyon-like passage that is actually a single block that has been rent apart by tectonic forces – at various points you can see where the grain of the rock on one side matches the other. The Siq can seem to continue forever, and the sense of anticipation builds as you look around each corner for your first glimpse of the Treasury, Petra's most famous monument.

Tucked away in such a confined space, **Al-Khazneh**, or the Treasury, is where most visitors fall in love with Petra. The Hellenistic exterior is an astonishing piece of craftsmanship, with the sophistication, symmetry, scale and grandeur of the carving enough to take the breath away of first-time visitors. Standing before the Treasury is a magical introduction to the ancient city, especially since the building is the precise location of the Holy Grail – at least according to the Hollywood classic *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

Heading towards the ancient city centre are over 40 tombs and houses built by the Nabataeans and colloquially known as the **Street of Façades**. Continuing along you'll reach a Roman-style **theatre**, which was built over 2000 years ago and has a capacity of about 3000 in 45 rows of seats, with three horizontal sections separated by two corridors.

The Wadi Musa river bed widens out after the theatre – to the right (or north), carved into the cliff face, are the impressive burial places known collectively as the **Royal Tombs**. There are more tombs dotted around Petra than any other type of structure, and for years archaeologists assumed that the city was just one vast necropolis. The simple reason why so few dwellings have been discovered is that the Nabataeans lived in tents, much like some Bedouin do today.

One of Petra's most magnificent sights is **Al-Deir**, or the Monastery, which is reached via a one-hour uphill slog from the **Colonnaded Street** (Cardo Maximus). Similar in design to the Treasury, the imposing Monastery – 50m wide and 45m high – is just as impressive. Built in the 3rd century BC as a Nabataean tomb, the Monastery gets its name from the crosses carved on its inside walls, suggesting that the building was used as a church in Byzantine times. The building has towering columns and a large urn flanked by two half-pediments, and like the Treasury has heavy Hellenistic influences. **Petra by Night** (admission JD12; 🕒 8.30-10.30pm Mon & Thu) is a magical

Sights

About 7km south of Taba and 250m off the Egyptian coast is **Pharaoh's Island** (Gezirat Fara'un; adult/child ££20/10; 🕒 9am-5pm), a tiny islet in turquoise waters, dominated by the much-restored Castle of Salah ad-Din. The castle

is actually a fortress built by the Crusaders in 1115, but captured and expanded by Saladin in 1170 as a bulwark against feared Crusader penetration south from Palestine. At the height of Crusader successes, it was feared that they might attempt to head for

way to see the old city, taking you along the Siq (lined with hundreds of candles) in silence as far as the Treasury, where traditional Bedouin music is played and mint tea is served.

Sleeping

Cleopetra Hotel (☎ 3-215 7090; s/d JD10/14; 📺) Located in the centre of Wadi Musa, this popular backpacker spot offers the obligatory nightly screening of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Rooms with private bathrooms are fairly simple aside from a few Jordanian textiles strewn about, though the communal atmosphere makes this place a winner.

Amra Palace Hotel (☎ 3-215 7070; www.amrapalace.com; s/d JD23/35, half board JD25/40; 📺 🍷) Located in Wadi Musa, this midrange hotel offers bright and modern rooms without breaking the bank. Choice amenities include satellite TV, a heated outdoor pool, Jacuzzi, summer terrace and an excellent Turkish bath (JD15 per person).

Mövenpick Hotel (☎ 3-215 7111; www.moevenpick-petra.com; s/d JD92/112; 📺 🍷) Conveniently located just 100m from the entrance to Petra, this is the most luxurious place in town, and as posh as you'd expect from the renowned hotel chain. Heavy on the Mediterranean stylings, the Mövenpick lures in guests, and then holds their attention with a beautiful swimming pool, rooftop gardens, a Middle Eastern library, and a whole slew of on-site bars and restaurants.

Eating & Drinking

Al-Afandi Quick Restaurant (meals from JD1) A simple and friendly place located off the Shaheed roundabout, Al-Afandi caters primarily to locals, and offers hummus, felafel and shwarma at rock-bottom prices.

Sandstone Restaurant (mains from JD6) Near the centre of town, this tourist restaurant specialises in Jordanian dishes, including spit-roasted lamb and whole chickens, which are served up to hungry diners in an attractive outdoor beer garden.

Cave Bar (drinks from JD2.5) If you've never been to a bar in a 2000-year-old Nabataean rock tomb (and we're guessing you haven't!), then this memorable spot near the visitors' centre is an absolute must.

Getting There & Away

Fast ferries (one way US\$59) depart from Nuweiba, Egypt, at 3pm and arrive in Aqaba, Jordan, approximately one to two hours later depending on sea conditions. Heading back to Egypt, fast ferries depart from Aqaba for Nuweiba at 11am. Arrive at the ferry terminal at least two hours early, and be sure to have US dollars with you. Egyptian pounds are not accepted, and banks in town rarely have US dollars available. Free Jordanian visas can be obtained on the ferry if you have an EU, US, Canadian, Australian or New Zealand passport, though other nationalities will need to organise a visa in advance. For more information on the ferry crossing, see p484.

From the ferry terminal in Aqaba, share taxis meet arriving ships in order to shuttle tourists to their desired hotel in Wadi Musa. When dealing with taxi drivers, it helps to be a good negotiator – and to have a lot of friends with you to bring down the price. Generally speaking, you can expect to pay approximately US\$15 per person to reach Wadi Musa. The ride takes approximately two hours, and winds through some attractive stretches of open desert.

In Wadi Musa, most hotels offer a free shuttle service to and from the visitors' centre, though a taxi ride from anywhere in Wadi Musa to Petra shouldn't cost you more than JD1 or JD2. Although hikers have little difficulty exploring Petra's sights, donkeys accompanied with guides are available all around Petra for negotiable prices. Camel rides are more for the novelty value, though their photogenic appeal is undeniable, especially if you wrap yourself up like Lawrence of Arabia.

the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Some of the modern restoration is incongruous (concrete was not a prime building material in Saladin's time), but the island is a pleasant place for a half-day trip, with limpid and enticing waters and coral for snorkelling at

the island's southern end. There is also a café serving soft drinks and snacks.

The only boat to the island runs from the Salah ad-Din Hotel, on the coast just opposite. Unfortunately, the service is unreliable, though if the boat is running, a return ticket

costs only US\$4. Tickets are available from the hotel reception, and tickets for the island are available on landing.

Sleeping

Note that accommodation options are listed from south to north – unless you have your own transport, the only way to reach them is by service taxi or bus. Note also that meals are available at all of the properties we've listed, though a good number of visitors prefer to bring their own food and self-cater. All of the options listed can also arrange desert and diving safaris throughout Sinai.

Maagana Beach Camp (☎ 012 795 2402; huts from E£20) Although it's close to the road and exposed to the wind, this stretch of sand is conveniently located just north of Nuweiba. Accommodation is in simple huts that lack much individual personality, though the helpful Bedouin staff really bring this place together. If you want to explore the Nuweiba–Taba coastline, but don't want to venture too far from town, this is a good choice.

Ayyash Camp (☎ 012 760 4668; huts from E£20) Located on the rocky point of Ras Shaitan (Satan's Head) about 3km north of Maagana, this strip of coastline was also attacked in the 2004 Taba bombings (see p489). Since then the pace of life has returned to normal, and it's one of the most popular beach areas on the Nuweiba–Taba strip. Owned by a local Bedouin, Ayyash has a placid setting on a wide stretch of sand, canvas tents and simple huts with shared facilities, and no electricity.

Castle Beach (☎ 012 739 8495; huts from E£80; 🚰) Just north of Ayyash Camp near the *ras* (headland), Castle Beach is one of the few mid-range camps along this stretch of coastline. Accommodation is in comfortable bungalows that boast dramatic views of the frighteningly named 'Satan's Head'. One of the perks of staying here is the delightful beachside restaurant, which serves delicious meals that make the most of the local seafood.

ourpick Basata (☎ 350 0480; www.basata.com; camping per person US\$7, huts from US\$12, 3-person chalet from US\$60) Twenty kilometres north of Nuweiba in the Mahash area is Basata ('simplicity' in Arabic), an ecologically minded and hugely popular travellers' settlement that lives by its name – owner Sherif Ghamrawy's concern for the environment is reflected in the philosophy of the hotel, which uses organically grown produce and recycles its rubbish. There are simple huts

sharing facilities, pleasant chalets with electricity and private bathroom, a large camping area, a kitchen (where you can self-cater or arrange to have prepared meals), a bakery and shower blocks. Any cooking ingredients you could want are available, the ambience is very laid-back and family friendly with a New Age twist, and TVs and loud music are thankfully prohibited.

Club Aquasun (☎ 350 1208; www.dubaquasun.com; r from US\$55; 🚰 🚿 📺) Located 30km north of Nuweiba, and set on a 2km-long stretch of sand complete with its own house reef, this 75-room domed resort is an affordable spot for anyone looking for a splash of low-key luxury. Although not as swish as the hotels and resorts going up in Taba Heights, there is a good selection of facilities and amenities on offer, and a night or two definitely won't break the bank. If you want to take advantage of the grounds but prefer a bit more intimacy, the management also operates the nearby Aquasun Ghazaly (huts from US\$35), which consists of a smattering of simple beach huts surrounding a small beach bar and restaurant.

Hyatt Regency (☎ 358 0234; www.taba.hyatt.com; r from US\$115; 🚰 🚿 📺) This tasteful desert-pastel hotel was designed by the famous American designer and architect Michael Graves and seeks to replicate the opulence and elegance typical of the five-star resorts in Sharm. Nestled beside the mountains close to the beach, it has excellent facilities, including lush gardens, several pools, a large health centre, extensive water sports and a rapidly expanding list of gourmet restaurants. The Hyatt Regency is one of the showpieces of the Taba Heights development project, and aims to recapture a slice of the tourist industry that was lost in the 2004 bombings (see p489).

Getting There & Away

Buses from either Taba or Nuweiba will drop you at any of the places mentioned previously, although you'll probably have to pay the full Nuweiba–Taba fare (E£12, or E£70 from Cairo). When you're ready to leave, staff will help you hail a bus from the road.

TABA

☎ 069

Taba holds the dubious distinction of being the last portion of Sinai to be returned to Egypt under the terms of the 1979 Israel–Egypt Peace Treaty. It has been a minor point of contention between the two countries for nearly a

decade. Egypt argued that Taba was on the Egyptian side of the armistice line agreed to in 1949, while Israel contended that it was on the Ottoman side of a border agreed between the Ottomans and British Egypt in 1906, and therefore the lines drawn in 1949 and 1979 were in error. After a dispute lasting nearly a decade, the issue was submitted in 1988 to an international commission, which ruled in Egypt's favour – Israel returned Taba to Egypt later that year.

As part of this agreement, Israeli travellers were permitted to visit Taba visa-free for up to 48 hours, which sparked tourism development throughout the town. However, following a series of deadly bomb attacks in 2004 that killed and injured a large number of Israeli travellers, tourism has unfortunately virtually ceased in Taba. Today Taba primarily serves as a border crossing for overland travellers heading between Egypt and Israel & the Palestinian Territories.

Orientation & Information

There is a **post & telephone office** (☎ 24hr) in the town, along with the Taba Emergency Centre hospital, a bakery and an Egypt Air office (near Taba Hilton; it's often closed and there are currently no flights). Just inside the border are an ATM and several foreign-exchange booths. Cash and travellers cheques can also be exchanged at the Taba Hilton.

Dangers & Annoyances

On 7 October 2004, three bomb attacks in the Taba area killed 34 people and injured over 150 people – the worst of these attacks occurred when a truck bomb brought down several floors of the Taba Hilton. Although subsequent attacks in Sinai have targeted tourists in Sharm el-Sheikh, the possibility of another attack in Taba is still possible. However, it's worth mentioning that tourism in the town has since then virtually ceased to exist, which means that there are perhaps more likely targets in other parts of the country. Though the Israeli–Egyptian border remains perfectly safe and relatively hassle-free to cross, it's still worth paying attention to warnings.

For an overview of the history of terrorism in Sinai, see p457.

Sleeping & Eating

Sadly, the tourist potential of Taba was destroyed following the despicable attacks of

2004. Although a handful of tourists stop here en route to Israel, there is little in the town to warrant a visit, and today most of the hotels in Taba have simply closed their doors and shut down. Perhaps things will change in the years to come, though it's unlikely the damage will ever be entirely undone.

Taba Hilton Nelson Village (☎ 353 0140; www.hilton.com; Taba Beach; r from US\$100; ☎ ☑ ☒ ☓) The Hilton gained worldwide attention and sympathy in 2004 when much of it was destroyed in a terrorist attack. Since then, it has been rapidly rebuilding, and now offers a good selection of rooms in its Nelson Village compound, set in lush grounds overlooking the turquoise waters of the Gulf of Aqaba. Although the scars of the attack are still evident, the Taba Hilton stands as a testament to Egypt's resolve to fight domestic terrorism.

Castle Zaman (☎ 350 1234, 012 214 0591; www.castlezaman.com; meals from E£110; ☎ from 10am; ☑) This atmospheric stone castle on a cliff with views over the gulf has the best cuisine along this stretch of coast, featuring huge portions of items such as a full rack of grilled lamb. There's also a bar, a pool, a small private beach and a couple of rooms (available per night from US\$1000 to only those who want to rent the castle out in its entirety). It's a good idea to call in advance to confirm opening times, as the castle is sometimes booked for weddings or other events.

Getting There & Away

The Taba–Eilat border, which is open 24 hours daily, is the only safe and reliable crossing between Egypt and Israel. For more information, see p524.

AIR

Egypt Air has suspended its domestic flights to/from Taba, although it still maintains an office near the Taba Hilton. The airport is at Ras an-Naqb, 38km from Taba town.

BUS

East Delta Travel Company (☎ 353 0250) has its bus station along the main road about 800m south of the border. Buses to Nuweiba (E£15, one hour) leave at 7am, 9am and 3pm, with the 7am bus continuing to St Katherine (E£25 to E£30, four hours). There's also a bus from Cairo to Nuweiba that passes Taba about noon. Departures to Cairo (E£70 to E£80, six to seven hours) are at 10.30am, 12.30pm and 4.30pm,

and to Suez (E£45 to E£50, four hours) at 7.15am. Buses to Dahab (E£20, 2½ hours) and Sharm el-Sheikh (E£25 to E£30, 3½ hours) leave at 7am (terminating in Dahab), 9am and 3pm (both continuing to Sharm el-Sheikh).

Getting Around

CAR

Car rental is available at **Max Car Rental** (☎ 353 0333; tabareservation@max.com.eg; 🕒 6am-8pm), situated just before the border post, opposite the Taba Hilton.

SERVICE TAXI

Taxis and minibuses wait by the border for passengers. If business is slack, you may have a long wait for the vehicle to fill up – or you can pay the equivalent of all seven fares and leave immediately. Per-person fares are about E£15 to Nuweiba, E£30 to Dahab, E£45 to Sharm el-Sheikh or St Katherine's, and E£55 to Cairo. Your bargaining power increases if the bus is not too far off.

INTERIOR

Sinai's rugged interior is populated by barren mountains, wind-sculpted canyons and wadis that burst into life with even the shortest rains. The rocks and desert landscapes turn shades of pink, ochre and velvet black as the sun rises and falls, and what little vegetation there is appears to grow magically out of the rock. Bedouin still wander through the wilderness, and camels are the best way to travel, with much of the terrain too rocky even for a 4WD. Against this desolate backdrop some of the most sacred events in recorded human history took place, which has consequently immortalised the Sinai in the annals of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

ST KATHERINE PROTECTORATE

☎ 069

The 4350-sq-km St Katherine Protectorate was created in 1996 to counteract the detrimental effects of rapidly increasing tourism on St Katherine's Monastery and the adjacent Mt Sinai. In addition to the area's unique high-altitude desert ecosystem, it protects a wealth of historical sites sacred to the world's three main monotheistic religions, and the core part around the monastery has been declared a Unesco World Heritage site. Although at times it can be difficult to pry

yourself away from Sinai's beaches, a visit to the St Katherine Protectorate is not to be missed.

Orientation

Rising up out of the desert and jutting above the other peaks surrounding the monastery is the towering 2285m Mt Sinai. Tucked into a barren valley at the foot of Mt Sinai is the ancient St Katherine's Monastery. Approximately 3.5km from here is the small town of Al-Milga, which is also called Katreen, and is known as the 'Meeting Place' by local Jabaliyya Bedouin.

Information

Entry fees are payable at the **St Katherine Protectorate Office** (☎ 347 0032; www.stkparks.gov.eg; admission US\$3), located at the tourist village near the entrance to Al-Milga. Here, you'll also find informative guides to four 'interpretive trails' established in the area, including one for Mt Sinai. These booklets take you through each trail, explaining flora and fauna as well as sites of historical and religious significance.

To allow the local population to benefit from tourism, visitors are also requested to hire a local Bedouin guide. If you haven't arrived on an organised tour from elsewhere in Sinai, this is the best place to inquire about local guides.

The following listings are located in the town of Al-Milga.

Banque Misr (beside petrol station; 🕒 10am-1pm & 5-8pm Sat-Thu) Cash advances on Visa and MasterCard.

Police (☎ 347 0046; beside the St Katherine Protectorate Office)

St Katherine Hospital (☎ 347 0263) Very basic care only.

Telephone centrale (beside the bakery; 🕒 24hr)

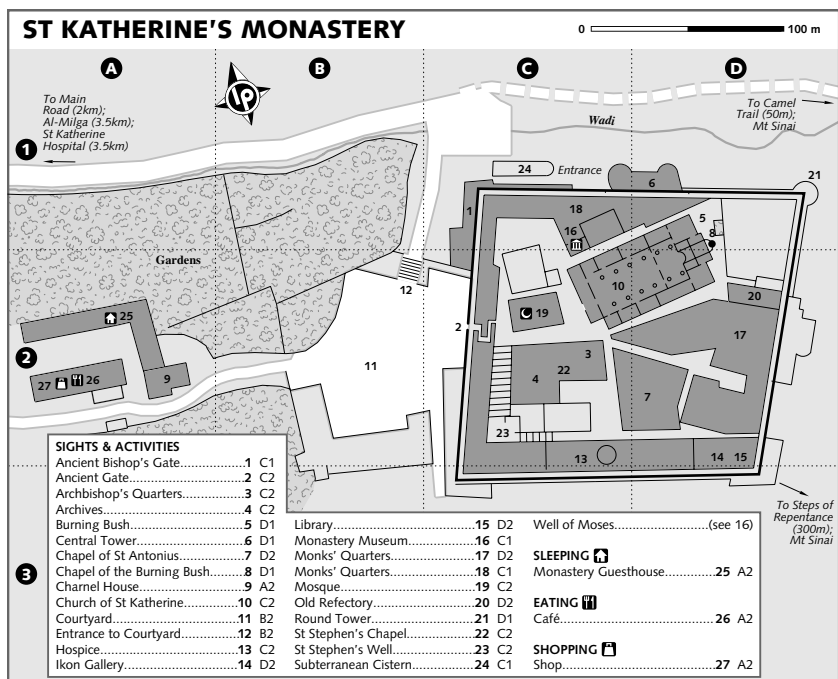
Tours

The majority of visitors arrive at the St Katherine Protectorate on an organised tour departing from either Sharm el-Sheikh (p466), Dahab (p475) or Nuweiba (p481). However, it's both cheap and easy to sleep within the confines of the protectorate, and to organise everything independently.

Sights

ST KATHERINE'S MONASTERY

The ancient **St Katherine's Monastery** (☎ in Cairo 02-482 8513; sinai@tedata.net.eg; admission free; 🕒 9am-noon Mon-Wed, Fri & Sun, except religious holidays) traces



its founding to about AD 330 when the Roman empress Helena had a small chapel and a fortified refuge for local hermits built beside what was believed to be the burning bush from which God spoke to Moses. In the 6th century Emperor Justinian ordered a fortress to be constructed around the original chapel, together with a basilica and a monastery, to provide a secure home for the monastic community that had grown here, and as a refuge for the Christians of southern Sinai. Since then the monastery has been visited by pilgrims from throughout the world, many of whom braved extraordinarily difficult and dangerous journeys to reach the remote and isolated site. Today St Katherine's is considered one of the oldest continually functioning monastic communities in the world, and its chapel is one of early Christianity's only surviving churches.

The monastery – which, together with the surrounding area, has been declared a Unesco World Heritage site – is named after St Katherine, the legendary martyr of Alexandria, who was tortured on a spiked wheel and then beheaded for her faith. Tradition holds that her body was transported

by angels away from the torture device (which spun out of control and killed the pagan onlookers) and onto the slopes of Egypt's highest mountain peak. The peak, which lies about 6km south of Mt Sinai, subsequently became known as Gebel Katarina. Katherine's body was subsequently 'found' about 300 years later by monks from the monastery in a state of perfect preservation.

Today a paved access road has removed the hazards that used to accompany a trip to the monastery, and both the monastery and the mountain are routinely packed with tour buses and people. It is especially full early in the morning, although somehow the monastery's interior tranquillity manages to make itself felt despite the crowds. When you visit, remember that this is still a functioning monastery, which necessitates conservative dress – no one with shorts is permitted to enter, and women must be sure to cover their shoulders.

Although much of the monastery is closed to the public, it is possible to enter the ornately decorated 6th-century **Church of the Transfiguration**, with its nave flanked by

massive marble columns and walls covered in richly gilded icons and paintings. At the church's eastern end, a gilded 17th-century iconostasis separates the nave from the sanctuary and the apse, where St Katherine's remains are interred (off limits to most visitors). High in the apse above the altar is one of the monastery's most stunning artistic treasures, a 6th-century mosaic of the biblical account of the transfiguration of Christ, although it can be difficult to see past the chandeliers and the iconostasis.

To the left of and below the altar is the monastery's holiest area, the **Chapel of the Burning Bush**. Access is restricted, but it's possible to see what is thought to be a descendant of the original **burning bush** in the monastery compound. According to the monks, this bush was transplanted from the nearby chapel in the 10th century, and continues to thrive centuries later. Near the burning bush is the **Well of Moses**, a natural spring that is supposed to give marital happiness to those who drink from it. Above the well is the superb **Monastery Museum** (adult/child under 12yr/student ££25/free/10), also known as the Sacred Sacristy, which has recently been magnificently restored. It has displays (labelled in Arabic and English) of many of the monastery's artistic treasures, including some of the spectacular Byzantine-era icons from its world-famous collection, numerous precious chalices and gold and silver crosses, and a priceless collection of ancient manuscripts and illuminated Bibles from the monastery's **library**.

Outside the monastery walls is a gift shop selling replicas of icons and other religious items (with branches in the museum and inside the monastery compound just near the entrance), and a café with an array of cold drinks and snacks. The least crowded days for visiting the monastery are generally Tuesday and Wednesday, while Saturday and Monday tend to be the most crowded.

MT SINAI

Known locally as Gebel Musa, Mt Sinai is revered by Christians, Muslims and Jews, all of whom believe that God delivered his Ten Commandments to Moses at its summit. The mountain is easy and beautiful to climb, and although you'll invariably be overwhelmed with crowds of other visitors, it offers a taste of the magnificence of southern Sinai's high mountain region. For those visiting as part of

CLIMBING & DIVING: A WORD OF CAUTION

Altitude can kill, particularly if your body is full of residual nitrogen. If you've been diving recently, be advised that Mt Sinai is high enough to induce decompression sickness. As a general rule, avoid climbing the mountain for 12 hours after one dive, or 18 hours if you've been on multiple dives. Although this may complicate your travel plans, trust us – you'll be delayed a lot longer if you end up confined in a hyperbaric chamber. And, of course, decompression sickness is anything but fun.

a pilgrimage, it also offers a moving glimpse into biblical times.

There are two well-defined routes up to the summit – the **camel trail** and the **Steps of Repentance** – which meet about 300m below the summit at a plateau known as Elijah's Basin. Here, everyone must take a steep series of 750 rocky and uneven steps to the top, where there is a small chapel containing paintings and ornaments (although it is usually kept locked). Both the climb and the summit offer spectacular views of nearby plunging valleys and of jagged mountain chains rolling off into the distance, and it's usually possible to see the even higher summit of Gebel Katarina in the distance. Most people make the climb in the pre-dawn hours to see the magnificence of the sun rising over the surrounding peaks, and then arrive back at the base before 9am, when the monastery opens for visitors.

The camel trail is the easier route, and takes about two hours to ascend, moving at a steady pace. The trail is wide, clear and gently sloping as it moves up a series of switchbacks, with the only potential difficulty – apart from sometimes fierce winds – being gravelly patches that can be slippery on the descent. Most people walk up, but it's also possible to hire a camel at the base, just behind the monastery, to take you all or part of the way to where the camel trail meets the steps. If you decide to try a camel, it's easier on the anatomy (especially if you're male) to ride up the mountain, rather than down.

En route are several kiosks selling tea and soft drinks, and vendors renting out blankets (££5) and mattresses (££10) to help ward off the chill at the summit. Trust us – both are

worthy investments as the mattresses will provide a layer of protection from the ice-cold rocks, and the blankets (even though they smell like camels) will protect you from the howling winds. The alternative path to the summit, the taxing 3750 Steps of Repentance, was laid by one monk as a form of penance. The steps – 3000 up to Elijah’s basin and then the final 750 to the summit – are made of roughly hewn rock, and are steep and uneven in many places, requiring strong knees and concentration in placing your feet. If you want to try both routes, it’s best to take the path on the way up and the steps – which afford impressive views of the monastery – on the way back down.

During summer try to avoid the heat by beginning your hike by 3am. Although stone signs have been placed on the trail as guides, it can be a bit difficult in parts, and a torch (flashlight) is essential. The start of the camel trail is reached by walking along the northern wall of the monastery past the end of the compound. The Steps of Repentance begin outside the southeastern corner of the compound.

Due to the sanctity of the area, and the tremendous pressure that large groups place on the environment, the Egyptian National Parks Office has instituted various regulations. If you spend the night on the mountain, you are asked to sleep below the summit at the small Elijah’s Basin plateau. Here you’ll find several composting toilets and a 500-year-old cypress tree, marking the spot where the prophet Elijah heard the voice of God. Bring sufficient food and water, warm clothes and a sleeping bag, as there is no space to pitch a tent. It gets cold and windy, even in summer, and in winter light snows are common.

As late as mid-May, be prepared to share the summit with up to several hundred other visitors, some carrying stereos, others Bibles and hymn books. With the music and singing, and people nudging each other for space, it can be difficult to actually sleep, especially in the small hours before sunrise. For more tranquility, the dawn views are just as impressive from the upper reaches of the camel path, shortly before it joins the Steps of Repentance.

Activities

TREKKING

St Katherine’s Monastery lies in the heart of South Sinai’s high mountain region, and the surrounding area is an ideal trekking desti-

nation for anyone with a rugged and adventurous bent. Treks range from half a day to a week or more, and can be done either on camel or on foot. Even if you decide to walk, you’ll need at least one camel for your food and luggage.

One of the most common circuits goes to the **Galt al-Azraq** (Blue Pools) and takes three to four days. The trail leaves Al-Milga via the man-made **Abu Giffa Pass** and goes through **Wadi Tubug**, taking a detour around **Wadi Shagg**, where there are springs, water holes and lush, walled gardens (*bustans*). The walk then goes through the picturesque **Wadi Zuweitin** (Valley of the Olives), with ancient olive trees said by local Bedouin to have been planted by the founder of the Jebaliyya tribe. The first night is often spent here, and there is a small stone hut in which hikers can sometimes sleep. The hike continues through **Wadi Gibal**, through high passes and along the valleys of **Farsh Asara** and **Farsh Arnab**. Many hikers then climb either **Ras Abu Alda** or **Gebel Abu Gasba** before heading to the spring of **Ain Nagila** and the ruins of a Byzantine monastery at **Bab ad-Dunya** (Gate of the World). On the third day the trail leads to the crystal-clear, icy waters of the **Galt al-Azraq**, a deep, dramatic pool in the rock, before continuing on the fourth day through more dramatic wadis to a camel pass on **Gebel Abbas Basha**. A one-hour hike up a fairly easy but

TREDDING LIGHTLY IN THE PROTECTORATE

In order to limit the impact of tourists upon this special place, the following code is now in force:

- Respect the area’s religious and historical importance and the local Bedouin culture and traditions.
- Carry your litter out with you, bury your bodily waste and burn your toilet paper.
- Do not contaminate or overuse water sources.

The following acts are illegal:

- Removing any object, including rocks, plants and animals.
- Disturbing or harming animals or birds.
- Cutting or uprooting plants.
- Writing, painting or carving graffiti.

steep path leads to a ruined palace built by the 19th-century viceroy Abbas Hilmi I, with stunning views from the summit (2304m). The trail then goes back to Wadi Zuweitin and retraces its way to Al-Milga.

Other destinations include **Sheikh Awad**, with a Sheikh's tomb and Bedouin settlement; the **Nugra Waterfall**, a difficult to reach, rain-fed cascade about 20m high, which is reached through a winding canyon called **Wadi Nugra**; and **Naqb al-Faria**, a camel path with rock inscriptions. A shorter trip is the hike to the top of **Gebel Katarina**, Egypt's highest peak at 2642m. It takes about five hours to reach the summit along a straightforward but taxing trail. The views from the top are breathtaking, and the panorama can even include the mountains of Saudi Arabia on a clear day. The **Blue Valley**, given its name after a Belgian artist painted the rocks here blue some years ago, is another popular day trip.

All treks must be done with a Bedouin guide and most are arranged through either the **Mountain Tours Office** (☎ 010 641 3575) in Al-Milga, or any of the camps and hotels we've listed (see below). Guided treks typically cost about ££50 to ££100 per day, with an additional ££30 to ££50 per day for food and equipment. You should also buy firewood here in order to discourage destruction of the few trees in the mountains. Whoever you go with, be sure to register with the police prior to leaving.

Make sure you bring water-purification tablets, unless you want to rely on the mountain springs. You'll also need comfortable walking boots, a hat and sunglasses, sunblock, a warm jacket, a good sleeping bag and toilet paper. Keep in mind that it can get very cold at night – frost, and even snow, are common in winter.

Sleeping

In addition to the aptly dubbed Monastery Guesthouse, which is in fact located at the monastery, there are also several hotels and guesthouses in the village of Al-Milga (Katreem), approximately 3.5km from the monastery. It's also possible to spend the night in either Dahab (p472) or Nuweiba (p479) and then simply access St Katherine's and Mt Sinai as part of a cheap, organised tour.

BUDGET

Fox of the Desert Camp (☎ 347 0344; faragfox2003@yahoo.com; camping per person ££5, dm/d ££15/40) Run by local Bedouin Soliman and Farag al-Gebaly

(also known as the Fox), this is a relaxed budget camp with simple but clean facilities. The owners offer the obligatory treks, though the real treat is their custom-tailored desert safaris from about ££75 per person per day. The camp is in Al-Milga, on the road behind the Catherine Plaza Hotel about 200m from the main round.

El-Malga Bedouin Camp (☎ 010 641 3575; www.sheikmousa.com; camping per tent ££10, dm/d ££15/40; ☑) Run by the affable Sheikh Musa, who can help you organise treks to Sinai and around the protectorate, this popular camp is a backpacker favourite. El-Malga is a rock-hewn single-storey structure offering a handful of rooms with sleeping mats and shared bathrooms with hot water – a blessing after a chilly night up in the mountains. The camp is located next to the mountain trekking office in Al-Milga, and is an easy 500m walk from the bus stand.

Safari Moonland Hotel & Camp (☎ 347 0085, 010 658 9550; mmland2002@yahoo.com; dm ££15, s/d/tr from ££25/50/60) This friendly, Jabaliyya-run budget hotel-camp is located just up from Fox of the Desert Camp. Offering a variety of dorm and private rooms with both shared and private bathrooms, this is a good choice if you're fussy about choosing the right room. As with the other camps, treks and tours throughout the area are on offer here.

Al-Karm Ecolodge (☎ 347 0032; ecolodges.saharasafaris.org/alkarm; Sheikh Awaad; camping/r per person ££25/75) A fine, albeit rugged, base for immersing yourself in the beauty of southern Sinai, the Bedouin-owned Al-Karm Ecolodge well outside Al-Milga, is in a remote wadi near the small settlement of Sheikh Awaad. It offers simple rooms, solar-heated shared showers, a kitchen and endless tranquillity. To get here, follow the track from Tarfa village, about 20km from St Katherine on the Wadi Feiran road – if you aren't with a local, call the Protectorate Office (☎ 347 0032) for directions and staff can arrange for someone to meet you.

MIDRANGE

Monastery Guesthouse (☎ 347 0353; St Katherine's Monastery; dm per person half board US\$25, s/d/tr with bathroom & half board US\$35/55/70) If location is your thing, the Monastery Guesthouse can't be beat. It's right next to St Katherine's Monastery, so you can literally roll out of bed and walk to the monastery before having your breakfast. A favourite of pilgrims the world over,

the Monastery Guesthouse offers well-kept rooms with heaters and blankets to keep out the mountain chill, and a pleasant patio area with views towards the mountains. Meals at the on-site cafeteria are filling and tasty, and lunches can be arranged for a few extra dollars per person.

Daniela Village (☎ 748 2671; s/d half board from US\$55/80; 🍴) One of the nicest midrange hotels in Al-Milga, this reasonably priced three-star affair is comprised of stone-clad prefab huts that are scattered around attractive grounds. The on-site bar and restaurant is a popular tourist hang-out, especially if you're in need of a Stella (or four) after an all-night trek. It's diagonally opposite the hospital and about 1.5km from the bus station.

St Catherine's Tourist Village (☎ 347 0333; s/d half board from US\$85/100; 🍴) This four-star establishment is Al-Milga's plushest accommodation option, with pleasant stone bungalow-style rooms that blend in with the surrounding landscape. If you want to sprawl out in comfort after punishing your body on any of the protectorate's rugged treks, you'll be glad you ditched out the extra cash to stay here. It's located along the same road as Daniela Village hotel, about 500m past the hospital and about 2km from the bus station.

Eating

In Al-Milga, there's a bakery opposite the mosque and several well-stocked supermarkets in the shopping arcade – perfect for stocking up on supplies before hitting the trails. Just behind the bakery are a few simple restaurants, though most tourists either self-cater at the camps or take their meals at their hotel.

Katrien Rest House (dishes E£2-15) This popular Bedouin-owned restaurant serves filling chicken, rice and vegetable meals either inside or on a veranda.

Kafeteria Ikhlas (dishes E£5-15) This simple and friendly restaurant has carpets and low tables under palm fronds, and serves hearty breakfasts and chicken, rice and vegetable meals.

Getting There & Away

BUS

St Katherine's Monastery is about 3.5km from the village of Al-Milga (which is where buses from Dahab, Sharm el-Sheikh and Cairo will drop you), and 2km from the large roundabout on the road between the two.

East Delta Travel Company (☎ 347 0250) has its bus station and ticket office on the main road near the post office. There is a daily bus to Cairo (E£37, six to seven hours) at 6am, via Wadi Feiran and Suez (E£35, four hours), and another to Dahab at 1pm (E£20 to E£25, two hours), where you can get onward connections to Nuweiba and Taba. For Sharm el-Sheikh, Hurghada and Luxor, it's necessary to change buses in Dahab. East Delta buses from Cairo to St Katherine's depart from Turgoman Garage at 10.30am (and about noon from Al-Maza).

Many hotels and camps in Dahab, Nuweiba and Sharm el-Sheikh, as well as travel agencies in Cairo, also organise trips to the monastery and Mt Sinai.

SERVICE TAXI

Service taxis usually wait at the monastery for people coming down from Mt Sinai in the morning, and then again around noon when visiting hours end. A lift to the village costs E£10 to E£15. Plan on paying about E£30/45 per person to Dahab/Sharm el-Sheikh. To Cairo, expect to pay about E£40 per vehicle.

WADI FEIRAN

This long valley serves as the main drainage route for the entire high mountain region into the Gulf of Suez. Sinai's largest oasis, it is lush and very beautiful, containing more than 12,000 date palms, as well as Bedouin communities representing all of Sinai's tribes. Stone walls surround the date palms, and the rocky mountains on each side of the wadi have subtly different colours that stand out at sunrise and sunset, making the landscape even more dramatic.

Feiran also has biblical significance – it is believed to be the place where Moses struck a rock with his staff, bringing forth water, and later became the first Christian stronghold in Sinai. An extensively rebuilt early Christian convent remains from this time, although you need permission from St Katherine's Monastery if you want to visit.

The valley is also an ideal spot from which to trek into the surrounding mountains. To the south, the 2070m **Gebel Serbal** (believed by early Christians to have been the real Mt Sinai) is a challenging six-hour hike along a track also known as **Sikket ar-Reshshah**. Those who persevere are rewarded with fantastic

panoramic views. You must be accompanied by a Bedouin guide for all hikes, though this is most easily arranged in Al-Milga, near St Katherine's Monastery.

QALAAAT AL-GINDI & NAKHL

In the centre of Sinai, about 80km south-east of the Ahmed Hamdi Tunnel, is Qalaat al-Gindi, which features the 800-year-old **Fortress of Saladin** (Salah ad-Din). In the 12th century Muslims from Africa and the Mediterranean streamed across Sinai on their way to Mecca. The three caravan routes they followed all converged at Qalaat al-Gindi, prompting Saladin to build a fortress here to protect the pilgrims making their hajj. He also planned to use the fort, which is still largely intact, as a base from which to launch attacks on the Crusaders, who had advanced as far as Jerusalem. As it turned out, Saladin managed to evict the Crusaders from the Holy City even before the completion of his fortress.

Qalaat al-Gindi is well off the beaten track and seldom visited. From the coast, you must turn off at Ras Sudr and follow the unignposted road from there. As there is no public transport, you'll need to either have your own vehicle or hire a taxi.

Continuing north from Qalaat al-Gindi for about 20km you'll reach the turn-off for Nakhl, another 60km east. This little community sits almost in the centre of the Sinai Peninsula, surrounded by a vast wilderness. It boasts a petrol station, a surprisingly well-stocked supermarket and a bakery. A road leads north from here to Al-Arish, but foreigners are forbidden to use it.

NORTHERN SINAI

Rarely visited by tourists, Northern Sinai has a barren desert interior, much of which is off limits to foreigners, and a palm-fringed Mediterranean coast backed by soft white sands sculpted into low dunes. As a cross-road between Asia and Africa, the coastal highway follows what must be one of history's oldest march routes. Known in ancient times as the Way of Horus, it was used by the Egyptians, Persians, Greeks, Crusaders and Arab Muslims. In fact, the Copts believe that the infant Jesus also passed along

this route with his parents during their flight into Egypt.

AL-ARISH

☎ 068 / pop 50,000

Much of the north coast of Sinai between Port Fuad and Al-Arish is dominated by the swampy lagoon of Lake Bardawil, separated from the Mediterranean by a limestone ridge. As a result of this inhospitable geography, Al-Arish is the only major city in the region, and by default the capital of North Sinai Governorate. Unsurprisingly, Al-Arish resembles a ghost town for much of the year, aside from the bustling central market that draws in thousands of Bedouin traders from around the peninsula.

In summer, however, the long, palm-fringed coastline of Al-Arish comes alive when holidaying Cairenes arrive en masse. With a modest smattering of holiday villages and beachfront hotels, Al-Arish is a popular alternative to the more upscale (and unashamedly brash) southerly neighbour of Sharm el-Sheikh (p462).

Orientation

The main coastal road, Sharia Fuad Zikry, forms a T-junction with Sharia 23rd of July, which runs a couple of kilometres south – changing name to Sharia Tahrir on the way – to the main market area.

Information

EMERGENCY

Ambulance (☎ 123)

Tourist police (☎ 336 1016; Sharia Fuad Zikry; ☎ 24hr)

INTERNET ACCESS

El Basha.Net (per hr £2; ☎ 11am-3am)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Mubarak Military Hospital (☎ 332 4018; near Governorate Bldg, Rafah Rd; ☎ 24hr)

Public Hospital (☎ 336 0010; Sharia Fuad Zikry; ☎ 24hr) To be avoided except in the direst emergencies.

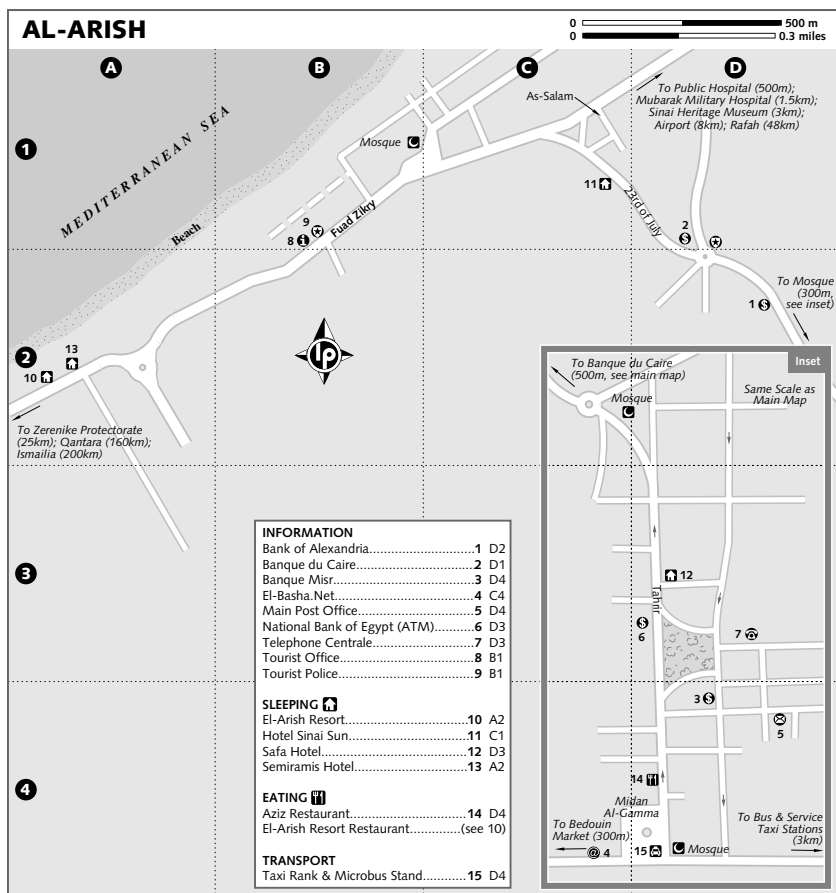
MONEY

Bank of Alexandria (Sharia 23rd of July; ☎ 8.30am-2pm & 6-8pm Sun-Thu)

Banque du Caire (Sharia 23rd of July; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sun-Thu)

Banque Misr (off Sharia Tahrir; ☎ 9am-2.30pm & 6-8pm Sun-Thu)

National Bank of Egypt (Sharia Tahrir; ☎ 9am-2.30pm Sun-Thu)

**POST**

Main post office (off Sharia Tahrir; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sat-Thu)

TELEPHONE

Telephone centrale (off Sharia Tahrir; ☎ 24hr)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist office (☎ 336 3743; Sharia Fuad Zikry; ☎ 9am-2pm Sat-Thu)

Sights & Activities

Stretched along the Mediterranean coast from the eastern edge of Lake Bardawil until about 25km east of Al-Arish is the 220-sq-km **Zerenike Protectorate** (admission US\$3; ☎ sunrise-sunset), a haven for migrating birds and a good

destination for nature lovers. The entrance to the protectorate, which was established by the Egyptian National Parks Office in 1985, is about 35km east of Al-Arish. Inside the gates there is a **visitors' centre** (☎ 9am-5pm Sat-Thu), with a cafeteria and information about some of the species of birds that stop here as they migrate between Europe and Africa. There is also a simple **dormitory** (☎ 100 544 2641; per person US\$10) and **camping** (per person US\$5). For both options, you will need to bring all food and drink with you as there is no restaurant, though basic cooking facilities are available on site.

The small **Sinai Heritage Museum** (Coast Rd; admission E£1, camera/video E£5/25; ☎ 9.30am-2pm Sat-Thu), on the outskirts of Al-Arish along the coastal

road to Rafah, was established in order to inform visitors to the peninsula about traditional nomadic life in Sinai. Displays include Bedouin tools, handicrafts, clothing and traditional medicines, with the odd English explanation.

Much livelier is the **Bedouin market** (🕒 9am-2pm Thu), held at the southern edge of town near the main market – note that it's signposted in Arabic and in English as the Souq al-Hamis. It's fascinating to watch as Bedouin come in from the desert in pick-up trucks or occasionally on camels, with the veiled women trading silver, beadwork and embroidered dresses, while the men sell camel saddles. Sometimes you can see the women buying gold after having sold their own handiwork. While some of the crafts are of high quality, you'll need to bargain hard to get these, as the savvy women usually save their best wares for middlemen buying for Cairo shops.

Al-Arish's other attraction is its long **beach**, which packs in the crowds in the hot summer months. With its parade of palms, fine white sand, clean water and the occasional small wave, it is one of the better Mediterranean spots in Egypt, and wonderfully peaceful in the low season. Note that women may feel uncomfortable swimming here unless they're in the confines of the El-Arish Resort. There is a beach curfew after dark, though it is only sporadically enforced.

Sleeping & Eating

Safa Hotel (☎ 335 3798; Sharia Tahrir; s/d E£25/35) Safa is the main budget choice if you want to be near the town centre, though keep in mind that the line between budget and bare-bones is thin to say the least. Rooms at the Safa are small and run-down, and the lack of air-con means you're going to sweat through the night. However, the pleasant rooftop terrace has a distant view of the ocean, and if you're looking for some serious local flavour, you've chosen correctly.

Hotel Sinai Sun (☎ 336 1855; Sharia 23rd of July; s/d/tr from E£75/85/90; 🍷) Although the rooms at this ageing hotel are starting to show their years, the Sinai Sun is one of the more respectable budget spots in town. Sure, the rooms are nothing to write home about, but you can definitely count on clean linen and no-nonsense management. If you're here in the low season, it's possible to bargain the prices down a bit, which makes it even better value.

Semiramis Hotel (☎ 336 4167/8; Sharia Fuad Zikry; s/d from US\$35/45; 🍷 🍷) One of the more upscale spots in town, the Semiramis takes a distant second place to the El-Arish Resort, though it's still a significant step up from the competition. With an inviting swimming pool surrounded by lounge chairs and leafy palms, it's worth spending a few extra dollars to indulge in a bit of low-key luxury. Be sure to ask for a room near the water as the ones in the compound across the street aren't worth considering.

El-Arish Resort (☎ 335 1321; Sharia Fuad Zikry; s/d from US\$65/85; 🍷 🍷) Formerly the Oberoi Hotel, this faded but pleasant five-star establishment is perfectly located on a long, breezy stretch of white-sand beach. Although it's incredibly understated compared to the resorts in Sharm, all of the rooms have sea views and balconies, enabling you to fall asleep to the sounds of the surf. There's also a restaurant and two large swimming pools on the grounds, though these are only filled during summer.

Aziz Restaurant (Sharia Tahrir; dishes E£5-25) With an inviting Bedouin-style inner room, this excellent and affordable restaurant offers filling meals of *fuul* and *ta'amiyya*, as well as grilled chicken, kofta, rice and spaghetti – with advance notice the owner can prepare multicourse meals for you featuring local specialities.

El-Arish Resort Restaurant (Sharia Fuad Zikry; dishes E£25-75; 🍷) One of the choicest eateries in town, the restaurant at the El-Arish Resort serves an appealing range of Continental-inspired dishes amid a sophisticated but relaxed setting.

Getting There & Away

The main bus and service-taxi stations are next to each other, about 3km southeast of the town centre (about E£2 in a taxi).

BUS

Superjet has buses to and from Cairo (E£23 to E£28, five hours) departing in each direction at 8am and 4pm. Similarly priced, **East Delta Travel Company** (☎ 332 5931) has buses to Cairo (E£18 to E£25) departing at 8am, 4pm and 5pm, and departures to Ismailia (E£10, three to four hours) at 7am, 10.30am, 11.30am, 1pm, 2pm, 3pm and 4pm. For Suez, change in Ismailia.

SERVICE TAXI

Service taxis from Al-Arish to Cairo cost around E£20 to E£25 per person. Service taxis

to Qantara cost E£10 to E£15, to Ismailia E£12 to E£17, and to the border (or vice versa) for anywhere from E£10 to E£20.

Getting Around

The main taxi rank and microbus stand is at Midan Al-Gamma, near the market at the southern end of town. Microbuses shuttle regularly between here and the beach for 25pt.

RAFAH

 068

This coastal town, 48km north of Al-Arish, marks the border with the Gaza Strip, the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territory that is (to say the least) a world away from the rela-

tive peace and calm of Sinai. Since it's been quite some time since foreigners (or anyone for that matter) were permitted to cross the border with ease into Gaza, Rafah is of little interest to anyone except for the odd journalist or aid worker heading to Gaza. With that said, fears of the volatility of Gaza spilling over into Sinai has led to a heavily policed border crossing, so unless you have all of your documentation in order, it's best to steer clear of Rafah altogether. If you do have a pressing reason to head for the border, however, several service taxis run daily between Al-Arish and the Rafah border crossing for about E£10. For border-crossing details and warnings, see p524.