

Suez Canal



The Suez Canal is truly one of the world's greatest engineering marvels. Slicing through the sands of the Isthmus of Suez, the canal separates mainland Egypt from the Sinai Peninsula as well as Africa from Asia. At 163km in length, the Suez Canal facilitates the transit of more than 20,000 ships a year between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, and serves as the lifeline of the Egyptian economy.

Despite these impressive statistics, however, the Suez Canal is not well set up for tourism, unlike its Panamanian counterpart. Strict security measures prevent tourists from transiting the canal on private boats, and independent travel in the region is tightly controlled. As a result, few foreigners set their sights on the Suez, aside from European yachties bound for the Red Sea.

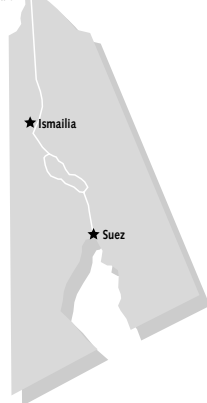
With that said, the appeal of the region lies in the three cities that sit along the western banks of the canal, namely Port Said, Ismailia and Suez. Colonial creations that emerged when the canal grew in prominence, these cities were on the front line during the wars with Israel and suffered greatly from bombardments. However, their 19th-century beginnings still survive in the wide, leafy boulevards and graceful colonial architecture that line their picturesque town centres, setting them apart from the rest of Egypt.

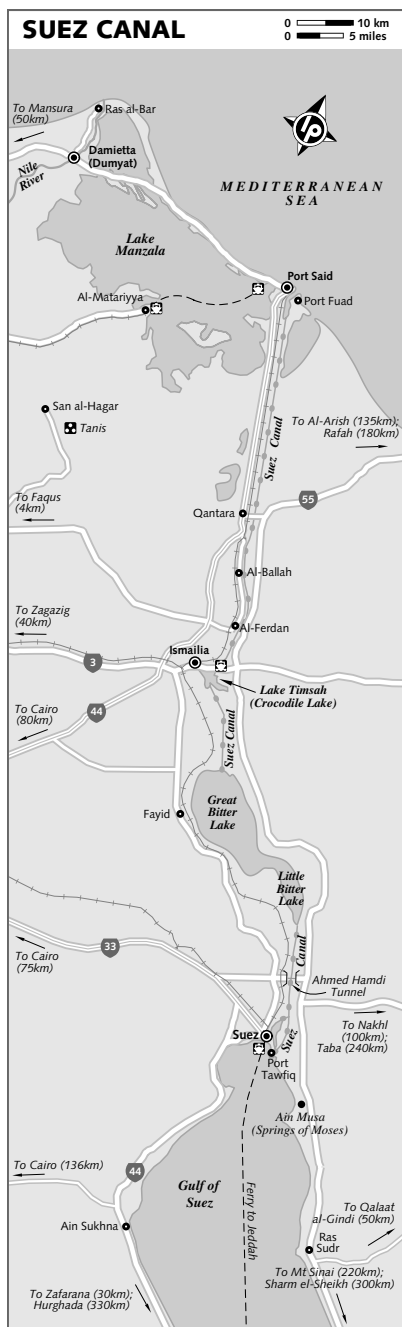
If you have the time and the inclination to step off Egypt's more trodden trails, the canal's urban trio offers an altogether distinctive experience. In contrast with the temples, pyramids and ruins that characterise other parts of Egypt, the Suez Canal offers an intriguing combination of *belle époque* architecture, modern shipping infrastructure and portside energy.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Stroll along the waterfront while admiring the graceful 19th-century architecture of **Port Said** (p408)
- Take the **ferry** (p411) from Port Said to Port Fuad to get a brief taste of life on the canal
- Step into Egypt's colonial past while wandering through the old European quarter of **Ismailia** (p412)
- Admire more than 4000 objects from Pharaonic and Graeco-Roman times at the rarely visited **Ismailia Museum** (p412)
- Watch supertankers appear to glide through the desert in the city of **Suez** (p414), the canal's southern terminus

Port Said ★★ Port Fuad





PORT SAID

☎ 066 / pop 550,000

Port Said's main attraction, and the reason for its establishment on the Mediterranean, is the Suez Canal. Watching enormous ships and tankers lining up to pass through the canal's northern entrance is an impressive sight to behold. Although heavily damaged in the 1967 and 1973 wars with Israel, much of the city has been rebuilt along its historic lines. Today, Port Said exudes a prosperous and bustling air, particularly its historic waterfront of late 19th-century colonial buildings. The city is also home to the leafy suburb of Port Fuad, which can be reached by a free ferry that crosses the Suez Canal – perfect for anyone who doesn't own their own yacht.

Orientation

Port Said is connected to the mainland by a bridge to the south and a causeway to the west. There is also a ferry between Port Said and its sister town of Port Fuad on the opposite side of the canal.

Most banks and important services are on Sharia Palestine, which runs along the canal, or on Sharia al-Gomhuriyya, two blocks inland.

Information

CUSTOMS

Port Said was declared a duty-free port in 1976. In theory, everyone must pass through customs when entering and leaving the city, though in practice this is seldom enforced. Regardless, be sure to have your passport with you.

EMERGENCY

Tourist police (☎ 322 8570; post office bldg, off Sharia al-Gomhuriyya)

INTERNET ACCESS

Compunet (per hr E£3; ☎ 9am-midnight) Next to Ferial Gardens.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Delafant Hospital (☎ 322 3663; Sharia Orabi)

Public Hospital (☎ 322 0694; Sharia Safiyya Zaghلول)

MONEY

American Express Bank (Sharia Palestine; ☎ 9am-2pm & 6.30-8pm Sun-Thu)

THE SUEZ CANAL

The Suez Canal represents the culmination of centuries of effort to enhance trade and expand the empires of Egypt by connecting the Red Sea with the Mediterranean Sea. Construction of the first recorded canal was begun by Pharaoh Nekau II between 610 and 595 BC. The canal stretched from the Nile Delta town of Bubastis, near present-day Zagazig, to the Red Sea via the Bitter Lakes. After reputedly causing the death of more than 100,000 workers, construction of the canal was quickly abandoned.

The project was picked up again and completed about a century later under Darius, one of Egypt's Persian rulers. The canal was improved by the Romans under Trajan, but over the next several centuries it was either neglected and left to silt up, or dredged for limited use depending on the available resources. The canal was again briefly restored in AD 649 for a period of 20 years by Amr ibn al-As, the Arab conqueror of Egypt.

Following the French invasion in 1798, the importance of some sort of sea route south to Asia was again recognised. For the first time, digging a canal directly from the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea, across the comparatively narrow Isthmus of Suez, was considered. The idea was abandoned, however, when Napoleon's engineers mistakenly calculated that there was a 10m difference between the two sea levels.

British reports detected that mistake several years later, but it was Ferdinand de Lesseps, the French consul to Egypt, who pursued the Suez Canal idea through to its conclusion. In 1854, de Lesseps presented his proposal to the Egyptian khedive Said Pasha, who authorised him to excavate the canal; work began in 1859.

A decade later the canal was completed amid much fanfare and celebration. When two small fleets, one originating in Port Said and the other in Suez, met at the new town of Ismailia on 16 November 1869, the Suez Canal was declared open and Africa was officially severed from Asia.

Ownership of the canal remained in French and British hands for the next 86 years until, in the wake of Egyptian independence, President Nasser nationalised the Suez in 1956. The two European powers, in conjunction with Israel, invaded Egypt in an attempt to retake the waterway by force. In what came to be known as the 'Suez Crisis', they were forced to retreat in the face of widespread international condemnation.

Today, the Suez Canal remains one of the world's most heavily used shipping lanes and toll revenues represent one of the largest contributors to the Egyptian state coffers. However, despite the hundreds of ships that pass through the Suez Canal each week, canal enthusiasts who want to do the same will find that it's not so easy. Organised trips don't exist and the police do not allow private boats to cruise the canal for security reasons.

Still, if you want to try to hitch a ride, the yacht club in Port Fuad (opposite) is the best place to inquire about passage on a vessel plying the canal, as the captains are sometimes looking for crew members. If you do manage to get on some sort of vessel, remember that taking photographs is generally prohibited, as there is a strong military presence all along the canal. Of course, the easiest way to get a fleeting taste of life on the canal is to simply take the free ferry over to Port Fuad from in front of the tourist office on Sharia Palestine in Port Said.

Take a stroll down Sharia Memphis, in particular, with its old Woolworth's building (now a souvenir emporium), and around the streets just north of the Commercial Basin. There are some wonderfully odd colonial remnants, such as the old Postes Françaises, a sign for the ship chandlers of the pre-Soviet 'volunteer Russian fleet' and another for the Bible Society.

Northeast of here, on Sharia 23rd of July, is the Italian consulate building, erected in the 1930s and adorned with an engraved piece

of the propaganda of Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini: 'Rome – once again at the heart of an empire'.

Several blocks inland, on and around Sharia Salah Salem, is an impressive collection of churches, including the Coptic Orthodox church of St Bishoi of the Virgin and the Franciscan compound.

At the very northern end of Sharia Palestine, near the Sonesta Hotel, is a large stone plinth that once held a statue of Ferdinand de Lesseps, until it was torn down in 1956

with the nationalisation of the Suez Canal. Although the statue was restored at the expense of the French government in the early 1990s, it has yet to be re-erected.

MILITARY MUSEUM

This compact museum (☎ 322 4657; Sharia 23rd of July; admission ££5; 🕒 9am-4pm Sat-Thu) houses relics from the 1956 Suez Crisis and the 1967 and 1973 wars with Israel, such as a few captured US tanks with the Star of David painted on them, as well as an odd collection of UXOs (unexploded ordnance).

PORT FUAD

Across the canal from Port Said is the genteel suburb of Port Fuad, founded in 1925. The streets near its quay invite a stroll, with their sprawling residences, lush gardens and sloping tiled roofs recalling the one-time European presence. Free ferries from Port Said to Port Fuad offer impressive views of the canal, and leave about every 10 minutes throughout the day from the terminal at the southwestern end of Sharia Palestine.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel de la Poste (☎ 322 4048; 42 Sharia al-Gomhuriyya; s/d/tr ££40/50/55) Port Said's best budget option, this faded classic still manages to maintain a hint of its original charm. That said, it will definitely take a bit of imagination (and perhaps some hazy vision) to invoke the colonial yesteryear of the Hotel de la Poste. However, clean and comfortable rooms (some with balconies) and a decent on-site restaurant are good perks if your imagination starts to fail you.

Helnan Port Said (☎ 332 0890; www.helnan.com; Sharia Atef as-Sadat; s/d from US\$75/120; 🍷 🍴 📺) Overlooking the Mediterranean at the north end of town, the five-star Helnan is Port Said's most sophisticated option. Offering low-key luxury rather than opulent pleasure, the Helnan has well-appointed rooms that boast views over the end of the canal and the Mediterranean. The hotel is also home to a number of top-notch restaurants that serve up some of the best eats in town.

Abou Essam (☎ 323 2776; Sharia Atef as-Sadat; meals ££20-30; 🍷) This favourite serves a help-yourself salad bar featuring tahini, *baba ghanoug* (purée of grilled aubergines with tahini and olive oil) and other delicacies, as well as a selection of fish, pasta and grilled meat.

Getting There & Away BOAT

Numerous five-star cruise ships ply the waters between Port Said and Limassol (Cyprus), with most sailing between April and October; see p525 for details.

BUS

The bus station is about 3km from the town centre at the beginning of the road to Cairo (about ££3 to ££5 in a taxi).

Superjet (☎ 372 1779) has hourly buses to Cairo (££16, three hours) from 7am until about 8pm, and a bus to Alexandria (££22, four hours) at 4.30pm daily. Bookings are advisable.

East Delta Bus Co (☎ 372 9883) also has hourly buses to Cairo (££14 to ££16, three hours) from 6am to 10pm daily. Buses to Alexandria (££18 to ££21, four hours) leave at 7am, 11am, 3.30pm and 7pm. Buses to Ismailia (££4 to ££6, one to 1½ hours) depart hourly between 6am and 7pm. Buses to Suez (££11 to ££13, 2½ to three hours) depart at 10am and 3.30pm.

SERVICE TAXI

Service taxis have an area in the bus station (about ££3 to ££5 in a taxi; ask for *al-mahattat servees*). Sample destinations and fares include: Cairo (££15 to ££20), Ismailia (££7 to ££12), Qantara (££5 to ££10) and Suez (££10 to ££15).

TRAIN

The five daily trains to Cairo via Ismailia (2nd-class service ££11 to ££15) are slow (five hours) and run at 5.30am, 9.45am, 1pm, 5.30pm and 7.30pm. There are no 1st-class services. Delays on these routes are common, so going by bus is more efficient and more comfortable than taking the non-air-con trains.

Getting Around

HANTOUR

The most enjoyable way to tour Port Said, especially around sunset, is by *hantour* (horse-drawn carriage). *Hantours* can be found along all the main streets, and cost about ££10 per hour after some bargaining.

MICROBUS

Microbuses run along main arteries such as Sharia Orabi and Sharia ash-Shohada, and cost 50pt for a short ride.

LIBERTY ON THE CANAL

New York's Statue of Liberty was originally designed to stand in Port Said at the entrance to the Suez Canal. Inspired by the colossal statues at Abu Simbel (see p323), French sculptor Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi formulated the idea of a huge statue of a woman bearing a torch. She was to represent progress – 'Egypt carrying the light of Asia', to use Bartholdi's own words. The idea was ultimately abandoned due to the cost, and the 'Light of Asia', which had developed from one of Bartholdi's models, was sent to New York, where she became Lady Liberty.

TAXI

There are plenty of blue-and-white taxis around Port Said. Fares for short trips within the town centre average E£1 to E£3.

ISMAILIA

☎ 064 / pop 900,000

Ismailia was founded by and named after Pasha Ismail, who was khedive of Egypt in the 1860s while the Suez Canal was being built. The city was also the temporary home of Ferdinand de Lesseps, the director of the Suez Canal Company, who lived here until the canal was completed. Not surprisingly, Ismailia grew in the image of the French masters who had ensconced themselves in Egypt during the colonial era. Today, Ismailia's historic town centre, with its elegant colonial streets, expansive lawns and late-19th-century villas, is one of the most peaceful and picturesque neighbourhoods in the country.

Orientation

The heart of Ismailia and the area most worth exploring is the old European quarter around Sharia Thawra and the central square, Midan al-Gomhuriyya. Sharia Thawra runs south from the train line to the placid Sweetwater Canal, with Midan al-Gomhuriyya several blocks to the west.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Rodu Internet Café (Sharia Thawra; per hr E£2; ☎ 10am-8pm)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital (☎ 337 3902/3; Sharia Mustashfa)

MONEY

Bank of Alexandria (Midan Orabi; ☎ 9am-2pm & 6-8pm Sun-Thu)

POST

Main post office (Sharia al-Horreyya; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sat-Thu)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist office (☎ 332 1078; 1st fl, New Governorate Bldg, Sharia Tugary, Sheikh Zayed area; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Sat-Thu) About 1.5km north of Midan Orabi.

Tourist police (☎ 333 2910; tourist village, beach area)

VISA EXTENSIONS

Passport office (☎ 391 4559; Midan al-Gomhuriyya; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu)

Sights & Activities

ISMAILIA MUSEUM

More than 4000 objects from Pharaonic and Graeco-Roman times are housed at the small but interesting **Ismailia Museum** (☎ 391 2749; Mohammed Ali Quay; adult/child E£6/3; ☎ 8am-4pm, closed for Fri noon prayers), located on the eastern edge of town. The collection includes statues, scarabs, stelae and records of the first canal, built between the Bitter Lakes and Bubastis by the Persian ruler Darius. The highlight of the museum is a 4th-century AD mosaic depicting characters from Greek and Roman mythology. At the top Phaedra is sending a love letter to her stepson Hippolytus, while below Dionysus is riding a chariot driven by Eros. The bottom section recounts the virtues of Hercules.

GARDEN OF THE STELAE

Just southwest of the Ismailia Museum is a garden containing a rather forlorn little sphinx from the time of Ramses II (1279-1213 BC). You need permission from the museum to visit the garden, but you are able to see the unremarkable statue from the street. The attractive grounds of the majestic residence between the garden and the museum belong to the head of the Suez Canal Authority and are off limits to the public.

DE LESSEPS' HOUSE

The residence of the one-time French consul to Egypt used to be open to the public. These days, however, you can see the interior only if you're a VIP of some sort, as the building currently serves as a private guesthouse for visitors of the Suez Canal Authority.

SERVICE TAXI

These taxis depart from the bus station. Destinations include Suez (E£5 to E£10), Port Said (E£5 to E£10), Zagazig (E£5 to E£10), Cairo (E£10 to E£15) and Al-Arish (E£10 to E£15).

TRAIN

Trains in the canal zone are slow and inefficient. If you must use them, 2nd-class trains to Cairo (four to five hours, eight daily) cost E£11 to E£14. To Port Said, there are six trains per day (E£3 to E£7) in 2nd class. There are also frequent trains to Suez (E£1 to E£3 in 3rd class only).

Getting Around**MICROBUS**

Microbuses ply the main arteries of the city. Fares average 50pt.

TAXI

There are plenty of taxis around town. Short trips cost E£1 to E£3; between town and the beaches expect to pay E£5.

SUEZ

☎ 062 / pop 550,000

Balmy, bustling Suez sprawls around the shores of the gulf where the Red Sea meets the southern entrance of the Suez Canal. Although it was heavily damaged during the 1967 and 1973 wars with Israel, little evidence of the devastation remains. Of course, the rebuilt main streets are mostly a façade hiding a maze of ramshackle backstreet neighbourhoods. However, Suez remains one of the best places in the region to view colossal cargo ships gliding through the canal. Viewed from afar, they appear to be ploughing through the desert, a surreal and unforgettable sight.

Orientation

Suez is divided between Suez proper and Port Tawfiq – the latter is at the mouth of the canal and is an ideal place for watching the ships go by. Port Tawfiq also has several streets with gracious old colonial buildings that managed to escape the bombing.

Joining Port Tawfiq with Suez proper is Sharia al-Geish, a wide thoroughfare that cuts through an industrial area before leading through the heart of Suez. Here, you'll find a few staid old buildings and a surpris-

ing number of colonial-era churches crowded among a proliferation of sombre high-rises.

Information**EMBASSIES & CONSULATES**

Saudi Arabian consulate (☎ 333 4017/8; Sharia al-Geish, Port Tawfiq; ☎ 9am–3pm Sat–Thu) Mainly processes work and hajj visas; allow up to one month for transit or tourist visas. The best bet is to go through Mena Tours (below), which will simplify the lengthy process and make sure you have the correct documents in advance.

INTERNET ACCESS

CACE (Sharia al-Geish, Suez; per hr E£2; ☎ 9am–8pm)

MEDICAL SERVICES

General Hospital (☎ 333 1190; Sharia al-Baladiya)

MONEY

Bank of Alexandria (off Sharia al-Geish, Suez; ☎ 9am–2pm Sun–Thu)

Banque Misr (Sharia al-Geish, Suez; ☎ 9am–2pm Sun–Thu)

POST

Main post office (Sharia Hoda Shaarawi; ☎ 8.30am–2.30pm Sat–Thu)

Port Tawfiq post office (Sharia al-Marwa; ☎ 8.30am–2.30pm Sat–Thu)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist office (☎ 333 1141; Sharia al-Marwa; ☎ 8am–8pm Sat–Thu, 8am–3pm Fri)

Tourist police (Sharia al-Marwa) Next to the tourist office.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Mena Tours (☎ 322 8821, 322 0269, 010 516 9841; Sharia al-Marwa; ☎ 9am–3pm Sat–Thu) On the waterfront in Port Tawfiq, diagonally behind the Saudi Arabian consulate. Arrange transit and tourist visas for Saudi Arabia here.

VISA EXTENSIONS

Passport office (Sharia al-Horreyya; ☎ 8.30am–3pm) Issues visa extensions.

Sleeping & Eating

Arafat Hotel (☎ 333 8355; Sharia Arafat, Port Tawfiq; s/d E£35/45, with shared bathroom E£30/35) If you're heading out to Saudi Arabia in the morning, this budget hotel is conveniently located near the port on a small side street off Sharia al-Geish. Like most portside hotels, however, the Arafat is a little rough around the edges, and isn't exactly the best choice for female travellers. However, if you only want to crash for a night

before setting sail across the Red Sea, you'll do just fine here.

Red Sea Hotel (☎ 333 4302; www.redseahotel.com; 13 Sharia Riad, Port Tawfiq; s/d from US\$45/55; 🍽️) The city's premier establishment is an affordable mid-range hotel located near the yacht club in Port Tawfiq – look for the large white-and-red sign poking out above the rooftops. No-nonsense rooms are a bit on the smallish side, though they're a good deal considering the professionalism of the management. If you're looking to sample the bounty of the Red Sea, there is a good on-site restaurant.

Al-Khalifa Fish Centre (☎ 333 7303; Sharia al-Geish, Suez; dishes ££20-50) Tucked away on the edge of Midan Nesima in the congested town centre, this no-frills place sells the day's catch by weight; pick your fish, then wait for it to be grilled.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

It's possible to travel by boat from Suez to Jeddah (Saudi Arabia), from where you can arrange onward boat travel to Port Sudan (Sudan); see p526 for details. Tickets to Jeddah can be booked through Mena Tours (p414). Be advised that you'll need to have your visa in order to purchase a ticket, and it's virtually impossible to get a ticket during the hajj.

Sometimes you can find passage on private yachts to destinations such as India, South Africa and even Australia. A good contact for arranging this is Mohammed Moseilhya at the **Damanhur Shipping Agency** (☎ 333 0418, 012 798 6338; Sharia at-Tahrir).

BUS

The bus station is 5km out of town along the road to Cairo. **Upper Egypt Bus Co** (☎ 356 4258) has buses to Cairo (££7.25, two hours) every 15 to 30 minutes from 6am to 9pm daily. Buses to Hurghada (££35 to ££40, four to five hours) leave almost hourly between 5am and 11pm. There are buses to Luxor (££45 to ££55, eight to 10 hours) via Safaga (££35 to ££45, four to five hours) and Qena (££45 to ££50, five to six hours) at 8am, 2pm and 8pm. Buses to Aswan (££55 to ££65, 11 to 12 hours) leave at 5am, 11am and 5pm. Buses to Quseir (££35 to ££40, seven hours) leave at 9am, 11.30am and 3pm.

East Delta Travel Company (☎ 356 4853) has buses to Sharm el-Sheikh (££30 to ££35, five to six hours) departing at 8.30am, 11am, 1.30pm, 3pm, 4.30pm, 5.15pm and 6pm. There is a bus at 11am to Dahab (££40 to ££45, five hours), and at 2pm to St Katherine Protectorate (££25, three to four hours). Buses to Taba and Nuweiba (both ££45 to ££50) leave at 3pm and 5pm. Buses to Ismailia (££4 to ££6, 1½ hours) depart every half-hour from 6am to 4pm. Departures to Port Said (££11 to ££13, 2½ to three hours) are daily at 7am, 9am, 11am, 12.15pm and 3.30pm.

SERVICE TAXI

Service taxis leave from beside the bus station to many of the destinations that are also serviced by buses and trains, including Cairo (££10 to ££15), Ismailia (££5 to ££10), Port Said (££10 to ££15) and Hurghada (££30 to ££50). The only place in Sinai that service taxis go to is Al-Tor (££15 to ££20).

With a group of seven people you can hire a 'special' taxi to get you to various other destinations, including St Katherine's Monastery (££225 per vehicle) and the Red Sea monasteries (££350, return).

TRAIN

Six very slow and uncomfortable 2nd-class Cairo-bound trains depart Suez daily, leaving at 5.30am (££15 to ££18, three hours) and going only as far as Ain Shams, 10km northeast of central Cairo. There are eight very slow trains to Ismailia (££1 to ££3 in 3rd class only, three hours).

Getting Around

MICROBUS

There are regular microbus services along Sharia al-Geish to Port Tawfiq. They will pick up or drop off anywhere along the route and cost 50pt.

TAXI

Taxis (painted blue) are easy to find almost everywhere. Expect to pay from about ££5 between the bus station and town, about ££10 between the bus station and Port Tawfiq, and about ££3 between Suez and Port Tawfiq.

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