



Gara Cave from inside.

(Haitham Salah)

In Egypt, millennia-old cave keeps captivating visitors

Haitham Salah

Cairo

The pieces of glittering rock dangling from the ceiling in the millennia-old Gara Cave in Egypt's Western Desert have an unearthly feel about them.

The few rays of the sun that reach into the dark cave reflect brazenly off the rocks, turning them, in the eyes of onlookers, into irresistible crystals that mesh with the barren and desert surroundings of the cave.

Gara Cave, between Egypt's Bahariya Oasis and the southern province of Asyut, about 350km south-west of Cairo, is a most rare archaeological treasure trove in the heart of Egypt's desert. The cave formed from water coming in contact with Egypt's Western Desert climate over millions of years.

"It is a stunning place by all measures," said Ahmed Hussein,

a guide who helps tourists explore the wonders of Egypt's Western Desert. "True, the cave is completely off the beaten track but the effort visitors must make to reach it is really worth it."

Gara Cave used to attract thousands of foreign tourists every year but it has been hit hard by the big drop in tourism numbers affecting Egypt for more than a year. Nonetheless, the cave is an important stop on the itinerary of local explorers, desert lovers and adventurers.

Dozens of Egyptians visit the cave every day, giving guides such as Hussein hope that the tourism industry will soon bounce back.

The cave was discovered by a German explorer hundreds of years ago but fell into oblivion until it was rediscovered in the late 1980s by another German explorer.

It is one of few magnificently decorated caves in Egypt. About 30 metres wide and 8 metres high, the cave contains diverse animal formations engraved on its rocks. The engravings, specialists said, sug-



Charming rock formations inside the cave.

(Haitham Salah)

gest the area – now a desert – was populated in the past.

The engravings date to the Neolithic Age, beginning about 10,200BC in parts of the Middle East.

The icicle-shaped rock formations of the cave, produced by the precipitation of minerals from water dripping through it, and its stalagmites offer visitors a rich treat of nature's work to contemplate and researchers wonderful material to study, archaeologists said.

"The stalactites hanging down from the ceiling of the cave like tree leaves are engineered by nature's perfect hand," said Egyptian archaeologist Hussein Abdel Rahman. "My career has taken me everywhere in the Middle East region but I assure you that Gara Cave is unequalled by regional archaeological standards."

Most visits of the cave start in Cairo and include the White Desert in the nearby Farafra Depression. The White Desert has massive chalk rock formations that were created by the occasional sandstorms in the area.

Other must-see landmarks in the area include the Golden Mummies Museum, the Tombs of Nobles and Alexander Temples in the nearby Bahariya Oasis.

Some visitors camp inside the cave, lie on their backs and contemplate its rock formations. Others enjoy lunch in the open at the foot of the area's sand dunes.

Packages tours to the area, including meals, one night's accommodation and transport, cost \$200-\$300, Hussein said.

Gara Cave is a most rare archaeological treasure trove in the heart of Egypt's desert.

"Some tour operators even organise cheaper tours, depending on the package itself," he said.

Ehab Hamdi, an Egyptian lawyer, said he learned about the cave a few years ago after a friend visited and raved about its wonders.

"It was only then that I decided to visit the cave with a group of my friends," Hamdi said. "Entering such a place and seeing the colours of the rocks inside it and their strange shapes is actually like a dream."

Haitham Salah is an Egyptian travel journalist.



Agenda

Algiers:
Through November 20th

The National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Algiers is the site of the seventh *National Photography Festival*, an event that includes photography professionals and amateurs from all over the world, to exhibit and share experiences.

Dubai:
Through April 8th

Global Village is a large seasonal cultural event in Dubai that offers an array of festivals, shopping and entertainment in an open-air theme park. This entertainment and shopping destination includes more than 75 participating countries, dozens of fun rides and 26 restaurants offering food from around the world.

Beirut:
November 13th

The 14th *Beirut Marathon* includes runners from around the world. Runners will zigzag through the city on a 42.2km route that passes historic monuments and medieval buildings.

Dubai:
November 22nd-26th

The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged) is a fast-paced theatrical romp through all 37 of Shakespeare's plays. The 97-minute show features Shakespeare as never seen before, including *Othello* presented as a rap song. The show is scheduled to take place at the Dubai Community Theatre and Arts Centre.

Marrakech:
December 2nd-10th

The *Marrakech International Film Festival* showcases some of the year's most important cinematic works from within the region and internationally. The programme includes tributes, conferences and debates in addition to the official film competition. Hungarian film-maker Béla Tarr will serve as jury president.

Dubai: December 7th-14th

Dubai International Film Festival is an observance of Arab and international cinema. The festival showcases films from Hollywood, Bollywood and beyond. A parallel programme will include seminars, debates and meetings.

Dubai: February 23rd-March 11th

The Dubai Food Festival is citywide celebration. It offers several food-related events and promotions. The event brings together the best in cuisine. Celebrity chefs will be present to meet people and share recipes of entertaining dishes and cocktail courses along with new trends in cooking. The festival is organised by Dubai Festivals and Retail Establishment (DFRE), an agency of Dubai's Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing (DTCM).

We welcome submissions of calendar items related to cultural events of interest to travellers in the Middle East and North Africa.

Please send tips to: editor@thearabweekly.com



Animal engravings on the rocks inside the cave.

(Haitham Salah)