



A view of the beach at al-Quseir.

(Ahmed Megahid)

Egypt's Red Sea resort of al-Quseir is simple, yet memorable destination

Ahmed Megahid

Al-Quseir

Few developers have capitalised on the tourist value of al-Quseir, a 5,000-year-old city on Egypt's Red Sea coast. Nature has, however, been more generous with the city that over the millennia was at the centre of attention of Egypt's rulers.

About 135km south of the renowned resort of Hurghada, al-Quseir was at the end of the shortest route from the Nile River to the Red Sea and became one of ancient Egypt's earliest and most important ports. It was at the heart of the economy of the reign of Queen Hatshepsut (1478-1458BC), who used the port city for trade. During the Roman Era (333BC-AD646), the city was at the centre of the economic, political and strategic plans of the Roman Empire.

With its 45,000 residents, al-Quseir remains a quiet Red Sea resort with sandy beaches, coral reefs and historical monuments.

When Muslim Arabs conquered Egypt in 639, they used al-Quseir for trade and as a main departure point for pilgrims bound to Mecca across the Red Sea.

Each historic phase left its mark on the city. Monuments, some of which are in ruins, testify to the city's prosperous past.

The best-preserved monument, al-Quseir Castle, was built by the Ottomans in 1799 to provide protection against invading armies. For many decades, the castle was a main military and political centre.

"Some of those who controlled the city made the castle the government headquarters," said Wasfi Hassan, one of al-Quseir's leading historians. "It is a relic of bygone times that offers an insight into the greatness of the history of this city and its importance for all those who conquered it."

Some parts of the castle, which overlooks the Red Sea, are intact, though badly in need of restoration.

The church of the city is a piece of art and an important spiritual centre. Built in 1920, the Blessed Virgin Mary and Martyr Barbara Church mesmerises visitors as soon as they set foot inside it.

The main hall of the church reflects the wonderful taste of its builders – Italian engineers who arrived in al-Quseir at the beginning of the 20th century to explore for phosphate.

The church's historic value mirrors the diversity of the city, which also boasts an ancient mosque.

"The church is only one item in a long list of interesting places to go to in this wonderful city," said Bashar Abu Taleb, head of the Red Sea Tour Guides Union. "Those visiting al-Quseir will lose a lot by skipping its old mosque and



The Ottoman castle in al-Quseir.

(Ahmed Megahid)

the residence of Egypt's last monarch, King Farouk, who used to spend most winters in the city."

Nature is al-Quseir's most outstanding attraction, however. Its warm climate all year makes it a perfect winter destination.

With its 45,000 residents, many working in the fishing industry, al-Quseir remains a quiet resort with sandy beaches and coral reefs.

It has come a long way from the major industrial town it once was to become a wonderful destination for diving. It is prized for its

well-preserved and stunning coral reefs. Diving is restricted to a limited number of divers, reducing the stress on marine life and the underwater environment.

The city has several dive clubs that provide visitors with diving gear, tours and tips about diving locations.

The desert of al-Quseir is appropriate for safari activities. Surrounded by mountains, the desert encloses an oasis where locals receive tourists, lavish them with Bedouin treats and help show them memorable time.

Simplicity makes the city a perfect destination for those tired of overcrowding and modernity but al-Quseir also caters to the tastes of culture and history lovers, as well as adventure seekers.

"The best thing about this city is that it is an affordable destination for both the rich and the less rich," said Murad Suleiman, who is a regular visitor to al-Quseir, especially during the winter.

"This is not an ostentatious destination but one where everything is real and simple, even though al-Quseir has a number of five-star hotels," said Suleiman, a civil engineer in his mid-40s. "The simplicity of the city, its virgin attractions and peaceful nature make it memorable for visitors."

Unlike Egypt's more renowned Red Sea resorts such as Hurghada and Sharm el-Sheikh, al-Quseir is a unique place in Egypt where one may go for scuba diving in the Red Sea or spend a comfortable afternoon sunbathing on a pristine beach and visit historical sites only a stone's throw away.



A foreign tourist rides on camel's back in al-Quseir.

(Ahmed Megahid)



Agenda

Dubai:
Through April 7

Global Village is a large cultural event that offers festivals, shopping and entertainment in an open-air theme park. This entertainment and shopping destination involves more than 70 countries with presentations in more than 36 pavilions. Participants can enjoy more than 50 rides and 26 restaurants offering food from around the world.

Doha:
Through April 25

Souq Waqif Spring Festival brings together street performers, puppet and musical shows, along with African circus performers, magicians and a range of slightly surreal one-off events, including a human cannonball and bungee jumping.

Muscat:
January 18-February 10

The annual Muscat Festival takes place in Amerat Park and Naseem Gardens. The programme includes poetry sessions, lectures, forums, concerts, storytelling evenings, plays, art exhibitions and other shows.

Dubai:
January 22-February 3

The musical "Evita" tells the story of Evita Peron, Argentina's first lady, who dedicated her life to charity work and helping the country. The musical, by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, will be performed at the Dubai Opera under the direction of Bill Kenwright.

Dubai:
January 26-27

The Quoz Arts Fest, at Alserkal Avenue, features a performance-based dance programme performed and created by local artists, in addition to live art exhibitions, murals, workshops, film screenings, gallery openings and live music.

Marrakech:
January 28

More than 8,000 runners are expected for the 29th Marrakech International Marathon. Internationally renowned sports figures are scheduled to be present and tourist activities and street shows will take place.

Beirut:
February 13-March 21

Al Bustan International Festival of Music and the Performing Arts is a musical celebration in Beirut. With an emphasis on chamber music, the festival promotes music from all over the world and includes orchestral concerts, choral music, puppets, opera and dance.

Luxor:
March 16-22

The Luxor African Film Festival is an annual event in Luxor, Egypt. In its seventh year the festival this year will screen long and short films produced in African countries in Long Narratives, Long Documentaries and Short Films categories.

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:
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