

SHARM EL SHEIKH

By DERICK McGROARTY

Derick McGroarty visits the tranquil resort of Sharm El Sheikh on Egypt's Red Sea Coast.



Sharm El Sheikh appears on maps from the 18th century as a small fishing village. Without the ancient sites and history found in many parts of Egypt it was little visited until recently. However, it is now established as a year round resort especially attractive to European

families in the sunny warm winter months – only a few hours by direct flight. From London, a longer 5 hour flight, British Airways regard it as long haul giving the opportunity of upgrades in premium economy and full flat bed Club World. I found their direct

Shopping in Souk



Desert Oasis



flights comfortable and on time. The return flight over the Alps gave spectacular views of snow covered mountains.

Many international hotel chains have opened 45/ star luxury hotels including Hilton, Marriott and

Movenpick in Naama Bay, a developing centre of beaches, shops, restaurants, discos and night clubs. Additionally spa and resort hotels have been built along the pristine clear coastline.

The biggest attractions are the

Coptic Christian Ikons



Road near Desert



coral reefs and abundance of diverse fish in clear water. Diving centres offer full Scuba diving trips for qualified divers and plenty of instruction leading to certified qualification. Snorkling in shallow waters is easy and a delight. The bays of Garden and Naba are renowned for coral and fauna but both are especially numerous in the Ras Mohammed National

Park.

One can sample Sharm's under water spectacular whilst staying dry via a glass bottom boat, which your hotel reception will help organise. A pleasant way to spend a few hours and you may be rewarded by upper deck viewing of dolphins leaping from the surface. Last year attacks by



Sinai Desert



sharks caused temporary closure of diving and swimming activities. The Egyptian Government have taken measures to protect tourists by setting up designated safe areas.

Longer, whole day, cruises are available from several companies. Time is allowed for diving and the return journey at sunset really shows the attraction of Sharma's beaches and coastline. On several evenings I viewed the return of the boats from the shore line of my hotel, the white boats in the blue water catching the rays of the setting sun was a pleasant way to end the day before dinner.

Even if you do not wish to enjoy the reefs and fish either under or on top of the water there are plenty of activities around. For the active there are banana boats, kite surfing and jet skiing. For the less inclined just sit back and relax in the sun or stroll the promenade at Naama Bay, perhaps bartering with Arab traders or shopping in fixed price shops.

A visit to the Central Market (Souk) is colourful. Entered through high

"temple" arches there is everything for sale; souvenirs, carpets, and spices are displayed on many open stalls alongside air-conditioned shops selling jewellery, gold, religious icons and other



Entry to Mosque

Evening Cruise Schooner



quality goods.

I combined my shopping trip with a visit to the largest Mosques, both relatively recently built. The Mustapha Mosque is in the classical ancient style whereas the Al Salem Mosque of contrasting modern architecture is equally attractive.

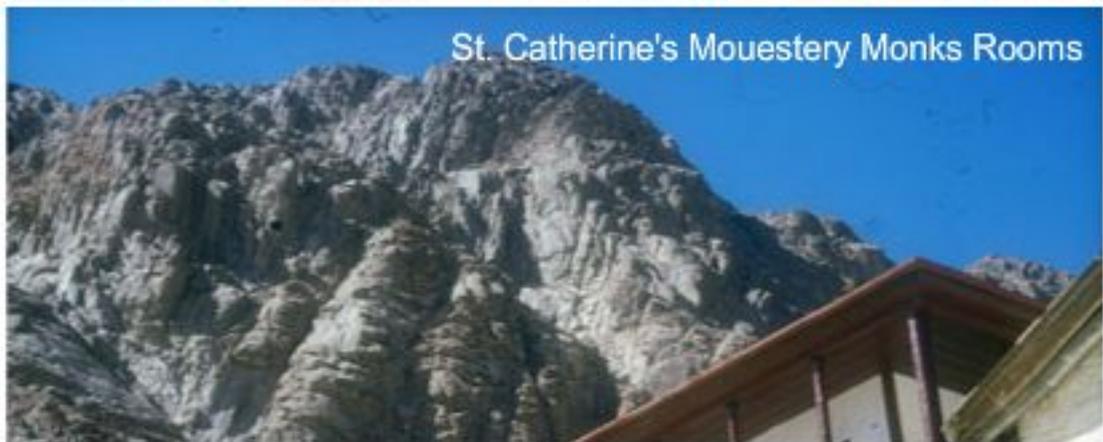
St. Catherines Monastery is a holy place for Jews, Christians and Muslims. Among many rare documents, (only a copy can be seen) is a Declaration of Freedom

of worship signed by Mohammed. The 10th century mosque near the entrance of the monastery was imposed by the then Sultan for equality. The Byzantine church contains a large collection of icons. Surprisingly, in the midst of an arid desert, the garden has cypresses and fruit trees; so, obviously, there is a good constant supply of fresh water from deep wells. Do not miss the Ossuary with its piles of skulls. With limited burial grounds the bodies of those monks who die there are exhumed after some decades and the skull retained.



Spices

St. Catherine's Mouastery Monks Rooms



There are complete skeletons of Archbishops including a 6th century St. Steven seated on a throne and draped in his robes.

The monastery can be reached by road in 23/ hours so a day trip is easily organised. The limited opening of mornings only does require an early start. Many years ago when I first visited I was impressed by the tranquillity and absence of crowds, but it involved me in a much longer uncomfortable journey. Now, easy road access and new hotels have greatly increased the number of visitors. Worth a visit. The drive itself

through the changing colours of the desert is a pleasure in itself.

Mount Sinai is the highest mountain in Egypt at 2,300 metres. It can be climbed by 3750 steps taking 3 or more hours. Strenuous but not requiring mountaineering skills or equipment. Camels are available, on a different route, for those who prefer this to walking. A torch and warm clothing are advised. With a guide, the best time is through the night or early morning to see the sun rise. Jews accept it as the place where Moses received the Ten Commandments.



Eventide

Flotilla of tour boats



Day trips by air are available to Cairo. Luxor etc. Even to Jordan and Israel. I prefer a more leisurely pace but for those with less time it is an opportunity for example to see the magnificent temples of Luxor and the tombs in the Valley of the Kings across the Nile. A long, tiring but exhilarating day including all transport, entries fees, guiding and lunch for about US \$350.

The political situation in much of the Middle East is changing almost day to day. I travelled to Sharm El Sheikh in March and experienced no difficulties with holiday makers enjoying the sunshine. The Egyptian people were friendly and helpful and nothing seemed too

much trouble for the hotel staff in their efforts to make us welcome and comfortable.

In UK I used Dial A Flight who gave prompt efficient service, practical knowledge and advice. A personal service I can recommend.

The Egyptian Tourist office can provide brochures and up to date information on the area to supplement their website.

Contacts:

British Airways
www.ba.com

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