

El-Alameen

Soldiers' hell metamorphosis into a paradise for tourists

El-Alameen - Mounir El-Fishawy

During the 1960's, the Egyptians proudly constructed the Aswan High Dam (Assad al-Aali) along with many other dams. One of them transformed the region of El-Alameen, on the northern Mediterranean coast, from a cemetery and hell for fighters to a heaven for tourists.



Exhibits inside Al Alameen Military Museum.

معروضات داخل المتحف العسكري.

This region had seen two battles: the first, in 1942 during World War II, and the second, in 2005, aimed at development and construction, to transform the region into a tourist destination for those who love nature, splendid sandy beaches and history.

The Battle of El-Alameen

Conversations about World War II evoke nostalgia. It's a long story in which the famous battle of El-Alameen must be mentioned. This battle was fought between allied forces, commanded by the British Marshal Montgomery, and the axis, led by the German

Marshal Rommel, nicknamed the "Fox of the desert". He was based in Tobrouk, Libya and arrived in El Alamein on Egypt's north coast, passing by Marssa Matrouh, which was his headquarters for some time. It is currently known as "Grotte of Rommel" and became a museum and place of interest for tourists. When Rommel left El-Alameen for medical treatment in Germany, Montgomery, whose army was superior in number and equipment, attacked his forces and won.

After the war, the countries involved in the battle of El-Alameen (The British Commonwealth, The Italians and the

Germans) gathered the remains of the fallen and built three cemeteries in their memory.

Military Museum of El-Alameen

The military museum of El-Alameen was established in 1965, then restored and reopened in 1992, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the battle of El-Alameen. Germany, Britain and Italy provided the museum with new information and exhibits. A modern room to show Egypt's role in this battle was also added.

During my visit to the museum, I noticed its ➤



Maps.

خرائط معروضة في المتحف العسكري.



Mr. Maghribi (left), Dr. Soleiman (right), Mr. Shahatt and Mr. Kamil welcome the tourists.

أحمد المغربي وزير السياحة (إلى اليسار) والدكتور إبراهيم سليمان وزير التعمير (إلى اليمين) يتوسطهما محافظ مطروح وإبراهيم كامل وأعيان مطروح في استقبال السياح



Mr. Shahatt at Ajziba coast. الفريق محمد الشحات محافظ مطروح في شاطئ عجيبية بمدينة مرسى مطروح

splendid facade and tanks, armoured vehicles and planes from the battle displayed in the open. If we try to forget the misfortunes and destruction of the war, the sea and desert insist on reminding us; in 1992, the sea threw up the relics of a plane and in 1999, the remains of a Ford military car, were found in the desert. These two vehicles have been spruced up and exhibited in the five-room museum. The first room called the "Common Hall", has glass boxes

with items from the countries that participated in the battle of El-Alameen as well as a life size statue of Rommel. During his visit to El-Alameen and the museum in 1967, Montgomery stood contemplating this statue for more than ten minutes. In the middle of the room is a gigantic wooden table (10mx3m) containing a map of the battle field. The other rooms are dedicated to each of the participating countries: Italy, Egypt, Germany and Britain.

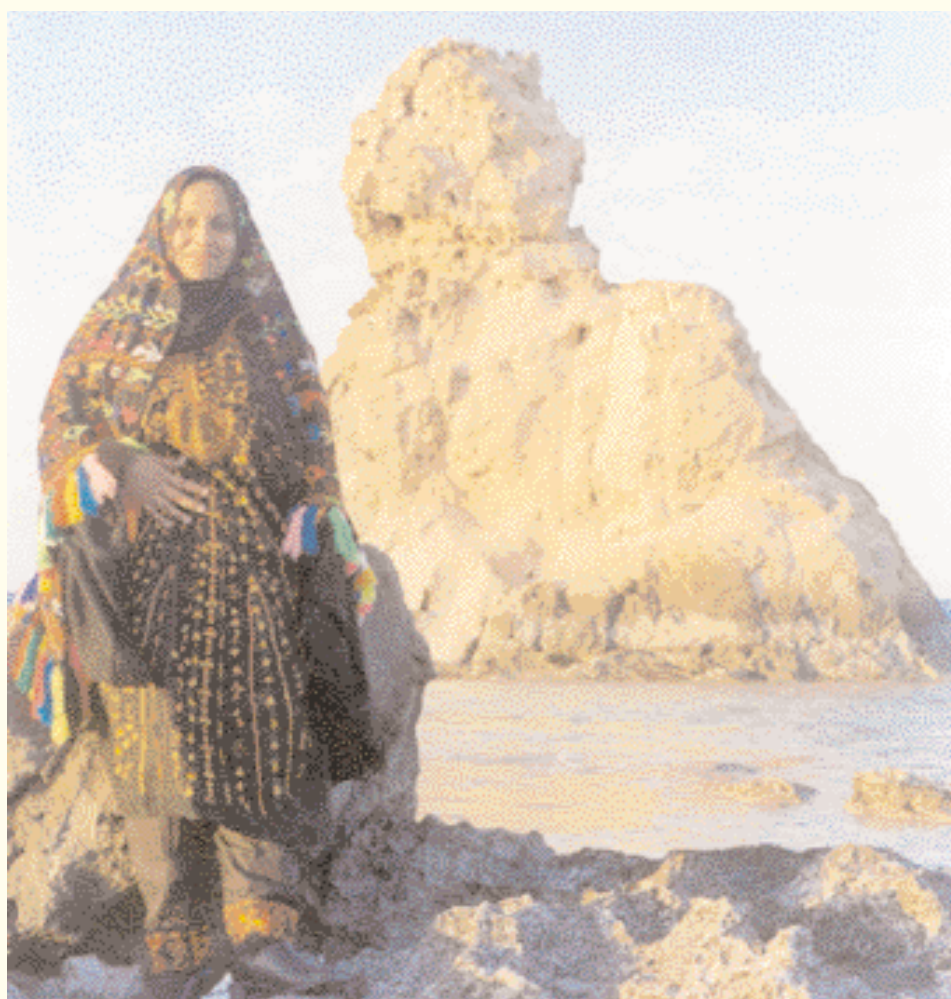
The Problem Of Mines

The mine fields in El-Alameen and the neighbouring desert are among the most dangerous legacies of World War II in Egypt, if not in the whole world. It is regrettable that about 20% of the ➤



The coast of Celopatra's Bath.

شاطئ حمام كليوباترا بمرسى مطروح



A girl from Marssa Matrouh at Cleopatra's Bath.

فتاة من مرسى مطروح بشاطئ حمام كليوباترا.

world's mines, 23 million in total, are in Egypt: 5.5 million in Sinai and the rest (17.5m) scattered over an area of 16,000 km of Egypt's western desert, from El-Alameen to the Libyan desert. But, they are controllable, thanks to the sign posts which indicate their whereabouts and to the

security services. Mines once killed about 700 people and injured more than 7,000.

El-Alameen On the International Tourist Map

In 2003, during a press conference, I asked the then Minister of Egyptian Tourism, Dr.

Mamdouh Baltaji, when Alexandria and the entire north west coast would be included on the world tourist map. The minister indicated that this was envisaged and referred to plans for the construction of an international hotel at El-Alameen, as well as developing the airport for international flights. I remember commenting "You speak as if everyone knows where El-Alameen is and that it contains the world's largest mine fields. The minister answered confidently: "Don't worry my friend, we won't construct a hotel or an airport in a mine field. The future will bear me out". I swallowed the answer but now I can say that the minister was true to his word.

In March 2005, the Cairo office of Islamic Tourism magazine received an invitation to the opening of El-Alameen's new international airport. The first charter flight arrived from London with 148 tourists onboard. They were welcomed by Ahmed El Maghribi, the Egyptian Minister of Tourism, Ahmed Shafik, Minister of Civil Aeronautics, Dr Mohamed Ibrahim Soleiman, Minister of Reconstruction, Mohamed Al-Shahatt, Governor of Matrouh and Ibrahim Kamel.

We were also invited to the inauguration of Movenpick - Ghazala overlooking the beautiful Mediterranean beaches. Both ventures were made possible with Egyptian capital, mainly from the businessman Ibrahim Kamel.

The staff of El-Alameen airport welcomed the British visitors with flowers, symbolic local gifts and tourist booklets. The tourists were impressed with the efficiency of airport formalities and appreciated the warm welcome. They were also impressed with Movenpick-Ghazala Hotel: the panorama of the open swimming pools, and the covered pools which were designed on the same model as Lebanon's Jeita grotto. They also commented on the splendid view over the azure sea and the fine white sandy beaches.

During a press conference about the Airport Movenpick Hotel, the Governor of Matrouh, Al-Shahatt, discussed tourist attractions such as the Siwa oasis and El-Alameen, which is taking its first steps towards a prominent place on the international tourist map. He also mentioned ambitious plans for the development of services on the northern coast: increasing the hotel capacity from 2,700 rooms to 30,000 in ten years. ■