

# Greenery In The Desert

## The Other Side Of Egypt

By Ian Stalker

Sand and sarcophagi go hand in hand west of Cairo, with a string of oases that provide insights into Egypt's golden past being found amid the world's greatest expanse of desert.



Amr Elezabi, the Canadian director of the Egyptian Tourist Authority, says the outposts of greenery found amid Saharan sand enable tourists to see another side of Egypt that is overshadowed by such famed ancient landmarks as the Sphinx and the Pyramids.

Among those oases is Bahareya, found four hours from the Egyptian capital, and home to the Valley of the Golden Mummies, so called because an Egyptian archeologist four years ago uncovered decorated sarcophagi dating back to the Greco-Roman period - a find that drew international attention to the site.

Those staying in Bahareya can camp or stay in hotels Elezabi says are "totally integrated into nature."

Another area oasis is Farafra. Those travelling between the green sites will encounter the White Desert, known for its "very strange" limestone formations that resulted from erosion.

"You feel like you're on the moon," Elezabi says. A third oasis is Dakhla, home to Pharaonic temples and tombs, with the 26th Pharaonic dynasty particularly well represented. Visitors will also find the medieval Arab towns of Kasr and Balat, marked by such architectural features as smallish streets and alleys and domed roofs.

A fourth oasis is Kharga, home to the oldest cemetery of the Coptic branch of Christianity in Egypt. Those exploring the site will find mausoleums that have frescoes recreating

scenes from Genesis. They date back to the 3rd Century A.D. Another Kharga curiosity is castles made from mud that date back to the Pharaonic period.

Energetic tourists in Kharga will find area sand dunes that lure snowboarders. That part of Egypt sees far fewer tourists than the likes of Cairo and Luxor, Elezabi reports. "It's a very unique experience," he says of the region. "Once you get away from the roads and into the dunes, you're obliged to be philosophical. At night, you have all the stars. It's a very clear sky all the time."

Western Egypt and eastern Libya will be prime viewing points for a total eclipse in late March, which is expected to attract many visitors. ■