

Tourism:

> By: Charles Stirling

A Revolution In Egypt's Red Sea

A revolution has been happening on Egypt's Red Sea. It started 30 to 40 years ago with a few lone insurgents, expanded to a die-hard bunch and has now swollen to a virtual flood. This revolution is tourism. Most visitors to the Egyptian Red Sea now buy a package holiday, staying in a coastal resort. I would like to suggest three alternatives (or additions) to that common package. Alternatives which give a rewarding feel of the real locality. These can help put more of your spending money into local hands and bring an awareness of the beautiful but fragile environment of this coastline.



Marine life

حياة البحار

This revolution started with a few scuba divers, mainly from the UK and Europe, who discovered the fantastic underwater life and conditions along these coasts. Some decided to set up homes and dive shops in small fishing villages, allowing others to more easily follow, and other divers did. With political changes and extension of marketing to non-divers wanting sun and beaches, self contained resorts and many more hotels have sprung up producing a near continuous strip of built land to cater for the influx. This has brought employment

to many, prosperity to some but it has also changed the landscape and put pressures on the environment. That change in the environment could ultimately be enough to push the interested visitor elsewhere. Egypt and its Red Sea coast is a fantastic destination. Yes, it has the occasional problems from extremists but it's probably overall still a safer place to visit than many others. Security provisions, and maybe old politics, restrict visitors more than in some Western countries, as evidenced by frequent out of town police road blocks checking on

vehicles and "no go" off road areas of desert, but the impact seems minimal.

The seaside of the Sinai Peninsula and mainland coast, nearly down to Marsa Alam, has resort hotel complexes offering enough amenities that visitors needn't set foot off the chosen property in a week's holiday. This may provide just the relaxing, self contained holiday many want and quality is impressively high. They and their spending stays within the complex, but do they see anything that is even more than remotely Egypt? Does much of their spending end up in the local economy? ▶

Just North of Hurghada is El Gouna, a highly organised totally purpose built resort town. It's held up as an example of "good" development as relatively little environmentally precious coastline has been taken due to its expansion inland. It has developed schools and facilities for workers, but one English couple commented they wouldn't go back as it had no feel of being Egyptian and it was difficult to get transport out. The same might be said of many of the large resort complexes.

The Red Sea along Egypt's shores does offer alternatives to this modern development. It may mean being just a little more adventuresome, a little more independent but the rewards can be high. My alternatives are: A City Hurghada, known in Egypt as Ghardaga, is a good example of the small fishing village turned tourist town. Its roots are young, only founded in the early 20th century. Diving then general tourism brought it to life and it is still expanding. Now it's a heaven of night life, hotels and gift shops. It's one of the gateway cities, one you might fly into on the package tour.

It's just a bit too large and spread out to explore totally on foot but well worth the effort. This is one where the package tour can give you the good prices and, if a central location is chosen, the chance to easily see more than the hotel. If you know your way around, the numerous local small private buses are cheap and efficient but mainly used by residents who know the system. Otherwise take a taxi to an area then explore on foot. Everyone is incredibly friendly and welcoming even if you don't speak the language. There is some of the brash, "in your face" street selling, more in the tourist oriented Sigala than the now older less fashionable Ed-Dahar area, though this can always be pleasantly dealt with by simply saying "no thanks". For women just remember appropriate attire for a Muslim country; being scantily clad brings unwanted attention while respect and understanding go a long way.

In the older Ed-Dahar area the markets are not as busy with tourists as they used to be, even with more tourist visits. I was asked the pertinent question by a shopkeeper of "where have the tourists gone?". The answer to that question didn't strike me until talking to other visitors on the flight home - they had stayed in the hotel ▶



Rugs on display

سجاد



Spice barrels

براميل البهارات



Ed-Dahar has many small shops in numerous streets such as this

في الدهار الكثير من المحلات الصغيرة في شوارع عديدة مثل هذا الشارع

complexes or on live aboard dive boats. The markets and small shops were great fun to wander around with a good feeling of being local. The fabric, spice, gift, shishas, craft, shoe and cycle repair shops, the whole mix of other little businesses and stalls all held interest, but particularly good was visiting the small stalls selling food. The fruit and vegetable stands had wide variety in good condition while the small stands and restaurants produced some wonderful tasting dishes. It really was good eating for incredibly little cost and a starting point to meet local people. For eating I simply picked busy stalls. Lots of customers indicated good food and quick turnover so food was fresh and I didn't get any of the tourist "stomach problems". Wandering the streets in Ed-Dahar during dusk to late evening even

more of your fellow visitors can be avoided and it's alive with locals relaxing, maybe playing dominoes or smoking a sheesha while drinking tea.

On the more touristy side, many of the classier restaurants are within hotels which also may put on elaborate shows or beach parties. On the outskirts is the 1001 Nights Show at Fantasia Hotel with an illuminated history of Egypt and horse riding. Scuba diving is catered for with over 100 businesses, often within a hotel, with "day" or "live aboard" boats and some also offering snorkelling, wind surfing, sail boarding. It's even possible to see the coral reefs without getting wet on a submarine trip. Desert visits by quad bike or 4x4 are on offer from many operators and you will be touted to take tours. It's

possible to stay well cosseted here, but worth making the effort to break free and explore the old town. One aspect worth being aware of is that most of the beaches are owned by hotels so you have to pay to use them outside of your own hotel. The city itself only offers limited, and not the best, public beaches.

The Egyptian Red Sea and its coastline is a fantastic area which seems to currently aim to attract the mass tourist market with good to excellent holiday offerings. Holiday complexes, by their nature, isolate the visitor in a protective cocoon. It's not difficult to be just a bit adventuresome and break out of that cocoon and experience the greater rewards of this fun, friendly, fascinating eternal land and sea. ■