

# Egypt's Eastern Desert:

## The Final Frontier For Tourists

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Driving south, down the coast road from Hurghada, has the reputation for being a boring trip as most visitors do this by coach and often at night. Drive with the possibility of making numerous stops and it becomes fascinating both for the scenery of the Eastern Desert and the small villages.

**T**he Eastern Desert really isn't on the tourist map; visitors go instead for the diving (or sitting relaxing in one of the new resorts). It was thought of as alluring and exotic by explorers in the 18th and 19th century but also threatening with its harsh terrain, long distances and difficulties. Mining companies now exploit phosphate deposits, Gold and emeralds are present but

now too difficult to mine for economic returns. With only a few modern adventurous tourists discovering this wondrous very sparsely populated area it remains poorly exploited for holidays. Exploring the desert in this region the most accessible area and an important region in its own right is the National Park of Wadi El Gemal and the associated private Fustat

Wadi El Gemal (FWEG) ecological tent camp. The park is a protected zone of some 6,200 square kilometres, it encompasses the complete watershed of Wadi (a dry river valley) El Gemal and its delta plus parts of other important wadi, mountain, desert and marine areas including the important coral reefs in the region and four offshore islands (Wadi El Gemal Island and the Hamata ▶



Mountains and dry river valley in Wadi El Gemal

الجبال ومجرى النهر الجاف في وادي الجمال





Coffee desert style      القهوة على النمط الصحراوي



Desert transport for Ababda tribesman

واسطة النقل عند العبابدة

archipelago). It's the third largest wadi in the Eastern Desert draining into the Red Sea and the one with most vegetation. As a visitor it offers some fantastic experiences, such as meeting some of the people of the local Ababda, even sharing a coffee with them. The Beja tribes, represented by the Ababda clan locally and the Bisharins of the Jabel Elba region located in the south eastern most corner of Egypt, are nomadic pastoralists who herd, goats, and sheep and are known for breeding the world's best camels. They were once major camel traders in the markets of Diraw north of Aswan. Now, with the Aswan High Dam and drought, much of their old territory is gone. Some now work in fishing or labouring on construction sites, others on the edges of tourism. They remain culturally distinct from the Arabic Bedouin, though are often still referred to as Bedouin as they adopted Islam a 1000 years ago and many took Arabic as a language sometime after.

At FWEG Bishari workers train the camels used to take visitors on various trips into the desert. Some camels have even been trained to pull a cart for those not wanting to actually ride one. Camels are not normally used for pulling and a special, sturdier, breed has been used for this. Some of the Ababda introduce visitors to local customs of making coffee and baking bread in the desert. Coffee has been imported for centuries on the camel trading routes. Just a taste of what life might be like to live as a pastoralist can be sampled. Going much further into the park required special arrangements with the park rangers for vehicle access using one of the park's 4 wheel drive trucks complete with a guide, or it could be achieved with a few days on camels. I chose the truck due to my lack of time and my sore behind - even though riding a camel was great fun. Here in the deeper desert other Ababda can be met tending small flocks of goats or sheep or

looking after their camels. This really is their life not some Disney set. The remains of the Roman buildings associated with the Cleopatra emerald mines are also deep within the park. Emeralds were prized as symbols of power and eternity during antiquity and it's believed that Egyptian Pharaohs began mining here, later to be exploited by the Romans and deserted when the Spanish discovered emeralds in Columbia in 1545. Many of the buildings and a temple dug into a hillside still have remnants standing. They can be visited if you make the long trek to this remote location. Very rare plants and animals such as the dorcas gazelle, Sooty falcons, and Lammergeier (or bearded vulture, a huge raptor with a wingspan approaching three meters), make naturalist excursions worth doing in the wadi while the delta offers easy access to seeing mangrove areas. ■



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