

Action and Adventure

There can be more to Egyptian weekends than lazing about and seeing the sights. For the active or adventurous type, Omm El-Donia has plenty to offer.

By Marwa Helal

Looking to do more on your vacation than just idling around in the sun and sand? Then get out and enjoy all the eco-activities that Egypt has to offer. Within a short distance of Cairo one can find some of the world's most stunning natural scenery, a huge variety bird and aquatic species, some of the planet's most luminous coral reefs and world-class golfing facilities.

The options may be so numerous that deciding which to focus on can be a bit overwhelming. That is why we have helped narrow it down: From fishing to birdwatching and from diving to the rising sport of geo-caching, this guide will not only point you in the right direction, but help you make the most out of your destination when you arrive.

Fishing

Lake Nasser, the world's largest man-made lake with a depth of more than 180 meters, is a tranquil and fruitful setting for fishing enthusiasts. In its depths the lake holds some of the best freshwater fishing in the world for both tigerfish and Nile perch; it is also a haven for several species of catfish. Navigating the rugged desert shores of Lake Nasser is made easier with assistance from fishing professionals.

For a guided tour of Egypt's best freshwater destination, contact the locally owned Adventure Holidays, a specialized branch of Travco (Tel: +2 (02) 737-1737 or 16161 from within Egypt). The agency will customize a package to suit any budget, group size, gear requirements or trip length. Side trips to the rescued antiquities sites on Lake Nasser's shores are also available. The fishing guides typically speak

English and Arabic.

The African Angler (www.african-angler.co.uk) also offers a fully guided tour of Lake Nasser. The tour runs for six full days, beginning on Tuesdays from Aswan. The package includes food, beverages, equipment and cots onboard the boat. To preserve Lake Nasser's fish population, African Angler implements a catch-and-release policy.

For those who prefer saltier waters, the fishing zones of the Red Sea are famous the world over. Visitors to Sharm El-Sheikh, Hurghada and Marsa Alam can arrange a deep-sea fishing excursion from any five-star hotel. There are also a number of companies large and small that offer organized expeditions to catch marlin, snapper, mackerel and tuna, all from the comforts of a fully equipped yacht. Adventure Holidays also organizes deep-sea fishing excursions.



sions out of Hurghada. Prices will vary according to your group's needs.

Bird Watching

Bird watching gets you out in the fresh air and closer to nature, requires little in the way of equipment and, with the growth of eco-tourism, can take you to some of the most exotic places on the planet. But you don't have to go far to get started — some of the most interesting birds can be spotted right in our own backyard.

The Gezira Club in Zamalek is home to the hoopoe, or hudhud as it is locally known, common bulbuls, cattle egrets and, in winter, European kingfishers, white wagtails and the like. Overhead, watch out for kestrels, much larger black kites and even parrots. There are also rose-ringed parakeets as well as the larger and even noisier alexandrine parakeet. At dusk, you

might also spot a Senegal thick-knee, better known as the karawan.

If your schedule allows for something a little further out, Wadi Degla, just outside Maadi, is another good place to witness some peculiar feathers without quite leaving the city. This steep-sided wadi, surprisingly heavily vegetated, is a northerly extension of the Eastern Desert, which is home to many of the species typical of the region. Among the most obvious birds are the wheatears, Lanner falcons, eagle owls and sand partridges. Brown-necked ravens are amongst the larger inhabitants.

Gabal Asfar is also nearby, off the Cairo-Ismailia Road, where you can spy the Smyrna kingfisher and the painted snipe. You may see tiny crimson and brown avadavat finches, and if you're really in luck, an Egyptian mongoose (admittedly furred, not feathered) may be seen trotting

along the irrigation ditches.

One needs only drive an hour south of Cairo to Fayoum to observe the ducks living on Lake Qaroon. In winter, the males of many species are at their most colorful and easy to identify. Females are much harder to pin down, but are generally guilty by association. Gadwall, shoveler, teal, pochard, tufted duck, common shelduck and mallard can all be seen alongside wintering great-crested grebes (which are not crested in winter). Other gems such as avocets, spoonbills and even greater flamingos can be found as well. In the farmland, you should also find fantailed warblers, also known as the zitting cisticola. Listen for its distinctive 'zit' call. The Delta lakes offer a similar range of species, spiced up by wintering terns and gulls, including little gulls.

Elsewhere in our bird-abundant country, the Sinai specialties near St. Catherine's Monastery feature the Sinai rosefinch, Tristram's grackle, yellow-vented bulbul and the Palestine sunbird. Leave Mount Sinai to the crowds and slip down to Wadi Arbaeen. At night, it is worth listening for Hume's tawny owl calling, one of the world's least-known species of owl.

Midway between the Nile's Rosetta and Damietta branches, where saltwater meets fresh, Lake Borolos is concealed in the dense greenery of Egypt's lowlands. Although best known as a birder's paradise, Borolos also hides a hint of history in its serene setting.

Declared a natural protectorate in 1998, the lake and its surrounding marshlands provide a diversified wetland ecosystem that covers some 420 square kilometers. Lake Borolos and its adjacent marshes are internationally recognized as a natural breeding habitat for wintering birds. The second-largest lake in Egypt, Borolos is home to a range of species that includes the wigeon, marsh harrier and coot. The lake is also home to the world's largest population of the whiskered tern, a Eurasian breeder. More than a seasonal stop for northern species, Borolos is the natural habitat for the spur-winged plover, Kentish plover, little tern, pied kingfisher, blue-cheeked bee-eater and the rare squacco heron.

The Borolos area is not just about birds. The mausoleum of Sidi Aly Abu Keram

rests amid the lake's northern sand dunes. As local lore has it, Abu Keram was a holy man from Morocco who died here on his way to Mecca.

If that is not enough, other rare bird species can be found in Kom Al-Akher, Abu Simbel and Wadi El-Gemal.

Diving

Due to its rare marine life and brilliant corals, Marsa Alam, located some 790 kilometers southeast of Cairo and 300 kilometers south of Hurghada is fast becoming the nation's top diving destination. With 100 kilometers of unspoiled coastline, luminous hard and soft corals, dolphins and rare fish, Marsa Alam is a dive spot not to be missed.

North and south of what was once a remote fishing village, self-contained resorts cater to foreigners arriving daily at Marsa Alam International Airport. Charter flights are available from Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Russia and Austria, and regular flights leave Cairo daily.

You can choose to stay at the posh resorts or in the more environmentally friendly tents, huts and stone chalets, but for your diving needs, get in touch with Emperor Divers (Tel: +2 (012) 737-2126; +44 (0700) 594-6973 in United Kingdom • www.emperordivers.com • reservations@emperordivers.com).

Another option is the East-West Travel Agency in Hurghada (Tel: +2 (010) 700-0795).

Nearby is Elphinstone Reef, where brilliant corals decorate the sheer-walled underwater scenery. Further afield are Gota Sharm, Habili Gamal and the thriving coral gardens of Fury Shoal. Live-aboard boat excursions can take you to Zabargad, a mountain rising sharply out of the sea and enclosed by a lagoon and circular reef with plenty of ghostly shipwrecks. To get your heart racing, go to Rocky Island or the remote Daedalus Reef during the summer months for a look at congregations of hammerheads and white-tip sharks.

Also worth a look are the prehistoric rock inscriptions along the Marsa Alam-Edfu road depicting hunting scenes and hieroglyphics documenting trade expeditions, as well as the ancient gold and emerald mines in the mountains south of town, which are now rich only in phosphate. Red Sea Desert Adventures (Tel: +2 (012) 399-3860/+2 (012) 105-6593 • www.redseadesertadventures.com) offers daily excursions to these and other locations by car, camel, donkey or foot, carried out with local Bedouins from the Ababda tribe. A full-day tour costs approximately LE 600 per person.

You can also visit the tomb of 13th-century Sufi Sheikh Sayyed El-Shazli, 145 km southwest of Marsa Alam. Tradition has it that he wanted to be buried in a place where nobody had ever sinned, which clearly required his tomb to be built in the middle of nowhere.

In Alexandria, divers can see the remnants of the ancient lighthouse and three shipwrecks from the third century BC, as well as Cleopatra's Palace. Alexandria Dive Company (Tel: +2 (03) 480-0363/6) organizes trips to underwater sites on the eastern harbor and Abu Qir, 6.5 km east of Alexandria.

Geocaching

This modern-day, high-tech treasure hunt will engage every part of your being. It is all part of a fast-growing, addictively fun sport known as "geocaching" (pronounced JEE-oh-cashing). The sport is based on a union between two relatively new technologies: the internet and global positioning systems (GPS).

This is how it works: people post coordinates on the internet telling others where they have hidden a treasure somewhere. The official website covers caches across the globe, claiming approximately 10,000 devotees. Nearly 90,000 caches have been placed in almost 200 countries, Egypt included.

The rules of the game are simple: Log onto the website and find the list of caches in your area. Jot down or print off the location details and maps, then set out with a GPS unit to get to within a few meters of the hidden treasure. Then the real hunt begins.

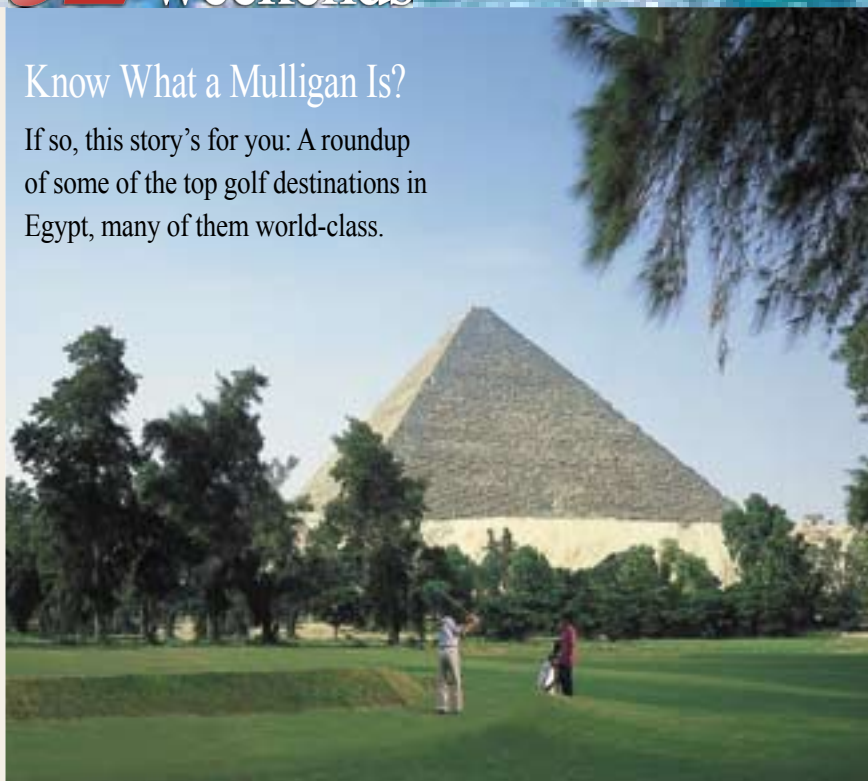
The cache can be hidden under rocks, dangled by fishing line under a bridge, secreted within the hollow of a tree or otherwise cleverly placed so that a careful search is necessary to find it. When you do find it, you can help yourself to one of the treasures within the cache container (usually small trinkets such as key chains, pens, toys, coins, etc.), as long as you make a contribution of your own. Then write the details of your visit in the enclosed log book and return the cache to its original hiding place. Once you return home, you can log your find electronically on the geocaching website. www.geocaching.com



Set out on a high-tech treasure hunt

Know What a Mulligan Is?

If so, this story's for you: A roundup of some of the top golf destinations in Egypt, many of them world-class.



IMAGINE TRACKING THE flight path of your golf ball against a backdrop of the Red Sea's white-crested waters, or sinking a birdie into an oasis of manicured grass surrounded by barren land. With the extensive, world-class selection of golf resorts from Cairo to Sharm to Hurghada, these fantasies are easily realized. Here are some recommendations for golfers of all levels.

The Cascades at Soma Bay Golf Resort and Country Club (Hurghada)

Located in the center of Soma Bay, Cascades is open to all guests at the resort complex, including Sheraton Soma Bay Resort and La Residence Hotel. The clubhouse itself resembles a European countryside mansion. It overlooks a rocky waterfall pouring into a series of deep-blue lakes in the midst of hilly green expanses that eventually lead to the Red Sea. It is an impressive 18-hole championship course that was ranked eleventh in the world by the readers of *Golf Journal*. Beginners can get into the swing of things at the Golf Academy, with its nine-hole Challenge Course. (Tel: +2 (065) 354-9896 • www.somabay.com)

Katameya Heights Golf and Tennis Resort (Cairo)

Katameya's hilly terrain has been sculpted into an exciting 18-hole championship course with spectacular scenery including lakes and palm trees. The course's changes in elevation demand golfers employ some creativity in their game. With a separate nine-hole course, Cairo's oldest golf course has options to suit all playing abilities. Club facilities include a driving range with five target greens and three practice greens, a pro shop, caddies, power and pull carts, and food and beverage on the course. For novices, there are lessons with golf pros, video swing analysis and a golf academy. The clubhouse offers two restaurants, two bars, a spa, a gym and entertainment facilities. (Tel: +2 (02) 758-0512/13/14/15/16/17 • www.katameyaheights.com)

JW Marriott Mirage City Golf Club (Cairo)

This 18-hole championship course's water features make players forget they are in the middle of the desert. The 7,106-yard course covers 250 acres and has a floodlit driving range, practice facilities and a high-tech swing analyzer. Both video and live lessons are available, the latter from two qualified PGA professionals. Other services include a

pro shop, caddies, power carts, club rental and tournaments as well as beverage and food service on the course. (Tel: +2 (02) 412-5041/43 • www.miragecitygolf.com)

Jolie Ville Mövenpick Golf & Resort (Sharm El-Sheikh)

Sharm El-Sheikh's only golf course sets no handicap standards and doesn't require you to show any professional certificates. The Jolie Ville Mövenpick's 18-hole championship golf course also hosts an International Golf Academy for teaching all levels of golf, with a 3-hole short game area and a double-ended driving range for training and practice. Other services include a pro shop, caddies, carts, lit driving range, club rental, tournaments as well as food and beverage service on the course. (Tel: +2 (069) 360-3200)

Al-Solaimanayah Golf City

This resort on the Cairo-Alexandria Desert Road offers 27 holes configured in three loops of nine, set amid greenery and lagoons that offer challenges suitable for every skill level. The Pyramids Golf Academy assists both beginners and advanced players. Practice facilities include the largest floodlit driving range in Egypt with eight target greens, as well as two short-game practice areas. Two putting greens offer different wind conditions, while an indoor studio has a hi-tech video analysis system. (Tel: +2 (02) 335-3317/8 • www.solaimanayah.com)

Steigenberger Golf Resort (El-Gouna)

The Steigenberger Golf Resort's 18-hole course has a maximum handicap of 45; players must present documentation of their handicap before receiving greens time. Designed by the American architectural firm of Gene Bates and Fred Couples, the course is built over a group of islands surrounded by blue lagoons. The club has two full-time PGA professionals that offer one-on-one instruction in both German and English; three more come in during the peak season. The clubhouse has a bar, a restaurant, exercise facilities and a health spa offering massage, a Turkish bath and steam room. (Tel: +2 (065) 358-0140, www.el-gouna.steigenberger.de).