

## Giza Pyramids

The Giza Pyramids are that kind of historical site that just blows your mind. The tallest of the three, the Great Pyramid of Khufu, towers above the desert at 481 feet. It was the tallest building on the planet for over 3800 years, until the construction of England's Lincoln Cathedral in 1300.

The three Giza Pyramids are located on the outskirts of Cairo. They were built between 2550 and 2490 BC to serve as a mortuary temple for Pharaohs Khufu, Khefre, and Menkaure. Exactly how the Pyramids were built, and by whom, remains a mystery today.

For years it was believed to be the work of slaves. But it is now thought that the builders were probably skilled workers from all over the country. The enigmatic Sphinx was built by Khefre, and its meaning is still debated among historians.

You can tour the inside of two of the pyramids during your visit. One of the three is always closed, in order to limit the impact of tourism on these ancient structures.

## Saqqara & Dhashur

Giza is what immediately comes to mind when most people think about pyramids, and the fact that such amazing structures were built 4500 years ago is truly mind-blowing. Yet, just a few miles away, there are some pyramids that are even older.

The pyramids in Saqqara and Dhashur were built around 200 years before those at Giza. Saqqara and Dhashur were the necropolises of Memphis, the capital of Egypt during the Old Kingdom. They're now a true treasure trove for archaeologists and anyone interested in Egyptian history.

Some of the most notable structures here include the Pyramid of Djoser (or Step Pyramid), the 80-ton alabaster sphinx, and the Bent and Red Pyramid. What's even better, they all see far fewer tourists than Giza!

### Karnak Temple

Moving south from Cairo, the expedition continues on to Luxor. Here you'll travel forward in time, leaving the mysteries of the Ancient Kingdom for the grandeur of the Middle and New Kingdom.

Luxor was constructed on the same site of Ancient Thebes, which was the capital of Egypt from approximately 2000 BC onwards.

One of the most notable sites in Luxor is Karnak Temple, a vast complex of temples and palaces. It was built in dedication to three Egyptian gods– Amun, Mut, and Khonsu– and gradually enlarged over a period of two thousand years.

Karnak Temple is the largest religious building ever constructed, covering a surface of 200 acres. The largest section is the Hypostyle Hall, which encompasses 54,000 square feet and features 134 columns, making it the biggest room of any religious building in the world.

### Luxor Temple

Located about 1.5 miles from Karnak, you'll find the world-renowned Luxor Temple. This is another spectacular complex of temples and shrines built by several pharaohs, and dedicated to the "Theban triad" of gods mentioned above.

Karnak and Luxor Temples were once joined by an avenue lined with sphinxes, which has been

partially unearthed. Walking down this avenue in the early morning mist (or after sunset, when it's all lit up) will make you feel as if you're stepping in the footsteps of ancient history.

Another notable feature of Luxor Temple is that it's been used almost continuously for worship. A Coptic church was built on the site after Christianity spread to Egypt, and in subsequent centuries a mosque was erected, which is still in use today.

### Valley of the Kings

The Karnak and Luxor temples lie on the East Bank of the Nile– the City of the Living, where the city of Thebes once stood. The West Bank was always the City of the Dead, where cemeteries, mortuary temples, and mausoleums were (and still are) located.

Another spectacular ancient site in Luxor is the Valley of the Kings, where pharaohs were buried for over 500 years. The tombs consist of a series of underground chambers, which are beautifully decorated with wall paintings and hieroglyphs, ending with the room where the pharaohs' mummies were placed in a sarcophagus.

Most of the sarcophagi and mummies now lie in Cairo's Egyptian Museum, with the exception of King Tutankhamun.

### Temple of Hatshepsut

This temple is located just a short drive away from the Valley of the Kings. It was built to honor of Hatshepsut, one of the few female pharaohs in Egyptian history.

The temple is noteworthy because of its architecture: It has three levels with colonnaded terraces, and it's built in a style reminiscent of the Greek and Roman classical architecture that emerged a

thousand years later!

The various levels feature decorated columns, carvings, and hieroglyphs.

### Temple of Hathor

From Luxor, we'll embark on a four-day Nile cruise to Aswan, taking in some of the best ancient Egyptian historical sites located along the great river.

The first stop will be the Temple of Hathor at Denderah, one of the best-preserved temple complexes in all of Egypt. It features a maze of underground passages, plus walls decorated with carvings and reliefs that still retain surprisingly vivid colors.

One of the best-known bas-reliefs is the Denderah Zodiac, which is located on the roof of a chapel and depicts images of Taurus and Libra. The relief in the temple is actually a replica: The original now resides in the Louvre in Paris.

### Temple of Horus

Another stunning temple located in the vicinity of the Nile is the Temple of Horus in Edfu.

This is very well-preserved site because it's far more recent than the Luxor and Karnak Temples. It was completed in the Ptolemaic period, between 237 and 57 BC. Another reason why this temple is in such good condition is that it was buried in sand for hundreds of years, which contributed to preserving the carvings and wall paintings inside.

The temple is dedicated to Horus, the falcon god, who is frequently portrayed in statues and wall decorations around the site. It is also one of the few temples to survive with an intact ceiling.

## Temple of Kom Ombo

Not far from the Temple of Horus, there's also the Kom Ombo Temple, one of the most unusual Egyptian historical sites.

Kom Ombo is known as a "double temple," as it was dedicated to two different sets of gods. The southern part of the temple is dedicated to the crocodile god Sobek, the god of fertility and creator of the world, and the northern side is in honor of Horus.

The two parts of the temple are exactly symmetrical, which is a true rarity in ancient Egyptian architecture.

## Abu Simbel

After reaching Aswan, we'll fly to Abu Simbel, a temple complex in the far south of Egypt. There, twin temples were carved out of the mountainside in the 13th century BC, and dedicated to the great pharaoh Ramesses II and his wife.

The most recognizable feature of both temples are the colossal statues you'll find at the entrance. The Ramesses II ones reach up to 65 feet.

Abu Simbel is unique because the two temples were about to disappear under the water of the Aswan High Dam forever before an international task force arranged to have them relocated.

The process ultimately took five years. The two temples were carefully cut and reassembled in a safe location far away from the dam waters, in what proved one of the most challenging projects of modern engineering. –Margherita Ragg