

Egypt Itinerary

I took this trip with a friend **right after Christmas** (I flew to Madrid from Boston) and a third friend joined us in Cairo for the last half of the trip. The trip was **action-packed**, there were a number of early mornings, **several flights** and only one full day of real relaxation; nonetheless it didn't seem too rushed. With only 10 days for my first trip to Egypt, I'm not sure I would have done anything differently.

A note on costs: I like to strike a balance between **keeping costs down** and not missing out on **good deals** or on experiences that I'll regret having skipped later on. If you're taste for adventure is strong, experiment a little with the cost-cutting. But if you have limited time and you are looking for more of a balance between relaxation and adventure, Egypt is a place where **a little splurge can go a long way**. We quickly discovered that to achieve the vacation we were hoping for, it was best to sign up for **small group tours** or for **private guides** in most locations. I prefer not to plan trips around sight-seeing. But that's just not realistic in Egypt—there are a lot of “tourist” sights worth seeing. Using guides allows you to see much more each day, rest and observe while someone else is driving you through the countryside or through the city and learn a lot at the same time. We were not shy about asking our guides questions about the sights we were visiting and also about **Egyptian culture** in general. We also stayed at hotels that are pricier than we would usually choose. But we wanted to stay in **safe** establishments, in safe neighborhoods, and enjoy the facilities as well.

Oh, and on the topic of money, Egypt is notorious for is “**backsheesh**”-demanding population. “Backsheesh” is a sort of unofficial, i.e. not obligatory or even appropriate at times, tipping. Everywhere you go, people will ask you for backsheesh: someone who gives you (even unsolicited) directions, someone who “guards” the public toilets, someone who points you to the Great Pyramid when you are standing 3 feet away from it—you name it, they want compensation. You can either **fight it or cave in**. We eventually stopped fighting it except in the most egregious situations and found this approach much less stressful—if we actually had the change to give. So when our third friend was meeting us in Cairo, we asked him to bring a roll of 1 euro coins. Each morning we'd each put 5-10 coins in our pockets and that way there was no messing around in wallets or backpacks when the inevitable “backsheesh?” propositions came. I highly recommend bringing a mountain of **1 euro coins or a stack of US\$1 bills** with you and starting every morning with a bunch in an easily accessible place.

- Jan 1 - Arrive Cairo (Hotel Marriott by airport)
- Jan 2 - Flight Cairo SES (Hotel SES)
- Jan 3 - Mt Sinai excursion (Hotel SES)
- Jan 4 - Flight SES-Luxor (Mara House, Luxor)
- Jan 5 - Luxor/Valley of Kings (Mara House, Luxor)
- Jan 6 - Flight Luxor-Cairo (Hotel Marriott)
- Jan 7 - Cairo (Hotel Marriott)
- Jan 8 - Cairo (Hotel Marriott)
- Jan 9 - Cairo (Hotel Marriott)
- Jan 10 - Cairo (return to Madrid)

Date	To	Time	Cost	Details
Fri, Jan 1	MAD-CAIRO Night at Cairo Marriot JW Marriott Hotel Cairo Ring Road- Mirage City P.O. Box 427, 11757 Heliopolis, Cairo, Egypt 20 2-24115588 <i>There's no real reason to stay at this hotel unless you really don't have time to get into the center of Cairo, but there is a lot of traffic getting into the city, so it was a good option given our limited timing. The hotel's top quality and has late-night food options. Don't be scared off by the security to get it—all good hotels in Egypt have metal detectors to get in the lobby.</i>	4:50PM- 10:30PM	€371.65 per person for Cairo Airport and SES Marriotts (3 nights)	<i>*Leave suitcase in Terminal 4S—Terminal 4S has 24-hour left luggage, which was quite useful for me, as I didn't want to lug my Boston-appropriate winter clothes to Egypt!</i> IB3734: Barajas Terminal 4S to Cairo Terminal 2 JW Marriott Hotel Cairo Ring Road- Mirage City- P.O.Box 427, 11757 Heliopolis, Cairo, Egypt Phone: 20-2-24115588 Fax: 20-2-24112266 Check-in: Friday, January 1, 2010 (03:00 PM) Check-out: Saturday, January 2, 2010 (12:00 PM) <i>A note about the Cairo airport—we picked a hotel with airport pick-up service, where they actually meet you near the gate and walk you through immigration. Bring US\$ for the visa, which you purchase at the airport. There is a beautiful new terminal for those flying Egypt Air. The terminal's not so nice for the others.</i>

Date	To	Time	Cost	Details
Sat, Jan 2	<p>Fly Cairo to Sharm el-Sheikh (SES)</p> <p>Afternoon: Ras Mohammad Natural park (snorkeling)</p> <p>Stay at Marriot Sharm El Sheikh Marriott Resort</p> <p>Naama Bay, Sharm El Sheikh Sharm El Sheikh, P.O.Box 27 Phone: 20-69-360-0190</p> <p>The SES Marriott would have been nice if we had been on the ocean side. The overall location in Naama Bay is great. But there's a (presumably cheaper) building on the other side of the main road where they put us. It was OK, but not worth the price. It was a good 10-15 minute walk to the beach (given that we had to risk life and limb crossing the main road without a crosswalk and then go through security again at the Marriott building on the other side of the street). I was also woken up super early each morning by the sound of suitcases and housekeepers' carts being dragged across the tile floor of the hallway. A friend had recommended that we stay at the Jolie Ville (http://www.jolieville-hotels.com/casino_welcome.php) or the Four Seasons (http://www.fourseasons.com/sharmelshikh/). We chose not too as those were too expensive, but in hindsight, perhaps we should have splurged. Or I imagine that the beach side of the Marriott would have been just fine.</p>		3 flights (per person) = US\$311	<p>Saturday, January 2, 2010 Egyptair # 305 Cairo International (CAI) to Sharm El Sheikh International (SSH) Departure (CAI): January 2, 11:15 AM EET (morning) Arrival (SSH): January 2, 12:15 PM EET (afternoon)</p> <p>http://www.touregypt.net/parks/ras_mohammed_national_park.htm</p> <p><i>Possible excursion to Ras Mohammad /snorkeling:</i> http://www.sharm-club.com/excursions_sharm_el_sheikh/tour_ras_mohamed_boat.htmv</p> <p><i>Possible Bedouin evening excursion:</i> http://www.sharmexcursion-tours.com</p> <p>Marriot Check-in: Saturday, January 2, 2010 (03:00 PM) Check-out: Monday, January 4, 2010 (12:00 PM)</p> <p>We didn't end up doing either of the excursions above; instead we booked an all-day boat and snorkeling tour through the Marriott. Although it required another early morning, it was well worth it, and we were able to relax and sunbathe a fair bit on the boat, with three or four 30-40 minute snorkeling diversions scattered throughout the day.</p> <p>Overall, I'd say that I'm glad I visited SES, to have gotten a feel for the landscape of the Sinai peninsula (definitely angle for a window seat on the plane—you'll even catch a glimpse of Saudi Arabia!), and to rest up for a day, but I was not at all impressed with the city or with the beach. The city is very commercial, built up, catering to tourists. There's a pleasant promenade but be prepared to get hassled. The beach itself was not particularly beautiful or expansive. The snorkeling was quite good. If I were to go back to the Red Sea, I'd check out Dahab instead (supposedly more of a backpacker town), go scuba diving instead of just snorkeling, and make it a point to climb Mt. Sinai. All Mt. Sinai organized tours leave late at night so you (don't sleep then) climb Mt. Sinai for sunrise, and then visit St. Catherine's Monastery. We had hoped to make the trip, but were just too exhausted to miss yet another night of sleep. And the trips aren't available on days the monastery is closed. We were also tempted by the 1-day trip to Jerusalem, as we had never been, but then decided we should save Jerusalem and the rest of Israel for its own trip.</p>
Sun, Jan 3	Stay at Marriott			

Date	To	Time	Cost	Details
Mon, Jan 4	<p>Fly SES to Luxor</p> <p>Night in Luxor at Mara House: http://www.egyptwithmara.com</p> <p>I cannot recommend Mara House more highly. It's not expensive, the rooms are spacious and beautifully decorated, Mara's son runs the best restaurant in town for authentic fare, and Mara herself will treat you more like part of the family than a houseguest. She goes out of her way to tell you about Luxor and the surrounding area, give you suggestions for daytrips and restaurants, organize small group tours with trusted travel companies, and share stories and folklore that put you at the edge of your seat.</p>		J paid €60 deposit for Mara House	<p>Monday, January 4, 2010 Egyptair # 425 Sharm El Sheikh International (SSH) to Luxor (LXR) Departure (SSH): January 4, 11:30 AM EET (morning) Arrival (LXR): January 4, 12:20 PM EET (afternoon) Again, go for a window seat!</p> <p>Mara House: +2 0105462480 Salah El Deen Al Auby (pronounced "Ayubbi") St. off Salakhana St (behind the train station)</p> <p>Felucca ride at sunset then laser light show (bus from Mara House at 4:30pm)</p> <p>I highly recommend the Felucca (traditional sailboat) ride on the Nile, especially at sunset. They usually run 1 hour, though you could pay for more. Don't forget your camera! You'll have to negotiate the price—just walk up to a boat and offer your price. Mara or whomever you are staying with can tell you what the going rate should be.</p> <p>We were hoping to do a hot air balloon tour when in Luxor, but Mara talked us out of it—she said the safety records of the companies operating at the time were not the best. Maybe that will change over time, but do some investigating before you sign up.</p>
Tues, Jan 5	<p>All day in Luxor and Valley of the Kings</p> <p>Night in Luxor at Mara House</p>			<p>All day West Bank tour (Mara House)</p> <p>Fantastic daytrip—Mara arranges everything so you're on a small group trip only with other people staying at Mara House. She'll even pack you a lunch and snacks to take along.</p> <p>A family with three young children was also on our tour. They said that the option to take tours or hire private guides was invaluable. It was hard enough to keep track of the kids, let alone find your way and read about the history of each sight at the same time! Egypt could be an overwhelming trip with kids, but it also has a lot to offer kids—boat rides, camel rides, exploring temple ruins....If you're traveling with children, I'd recommend getting a book on hieroglyphics. A kid could keep quite busy trying to spot as many of the recurring symbols as he or she can, or looking for just one of the symbols in as many places as he or she can.</p> <p>For dinner in Luxor, eat at least one night at the restaurant at Mara House (you get 15+ small dishes for the table, so you get to try a bit of everything!) I also recommend Oasis Café (St. Joseph Street, Tel. 0020952372914 –though you shouldn't need reservations), in a wonderful colonial-style building in the center of town, not far from the Luxor Temple. According to Mara it's the only decent place to eat in Luxor aside from her son's restaurant, and from the looks of it, she may be right. It's got a mix of western food (grilled cheese on Texas Toast!) and a few local dishes. I am reminiscing about the red lentil soup now...</p>

Date	To	Time	Cost	Details
Wed, Jan 6	Fly Luxor to Cairo Sleep at Cairo Marriot Cairo Marriott Hotel & Omar Khayyam Casino 16 Saray El Gezira Street · Cairo, 11211 Egypt (Zamalek Island) (~US\$200/night per room)			<p>All day Abydos and Dendera tour (Mara House)</p> <p>Wednesday, January 6, 2010 Egyptair # 366, Luxor (LXR) to Cairo International (CAI), Departure (LXR): January 6, 6:40 PM EET (evening), Arrival (CAI): January 6, 7:50 PM EET (evening)</p> <p>Another fantastic daytrip organized by Mara!</p> <p>The Cairo Marriott was definitely a worthwhile splurge. The rooms are classic Marriott rooms—modern, clean, comfortable, but nothing special in terms of décor. But the reception area and grounds are spectacular. It’s a former palace, and you can spend quite a bit of time just exploring the grounds, pool area, and 5 or so restaurants. Cairo is an amazing city, yet a crowded, noisy city, with a lot of hustle and bustle and a lot to take it. The Marriott is truly an oasis where you can relax and decompress, and not be (overly) worried about appropriate dress or being hassled as a woman. I never felt unsafe in Cairo, but at the same time, I got enough catcalls and propositions walking around with a male companion that I wasn’t particularly eager to walk around on my own. At least staying at the Marriott, I could walk around on my own and even lay by the swimming pool in a bikini without giving it a second thought.</p>
Thurs, Jan 7	Cairo (Marriot)			<p>On our first full day in Cairo, we visited the Egyptian Museum and walked around Zamalek Island, where the Marriott is located. I may not find a lot of support for this comment, but I was not impressed by the Egyptian Museum. Some people absolutely rave about it. But in my opinion, the artifacts are poorly labeled, badly cared for, and out of context. My advice: if you don’t feel you can miss the Egyptian Museum, visit it <i>before</i> visiting Luxor’s amazing sights. After seeing Abydos, Dendera and the sites of the West Bank, the Egyptian Museum is quite anti-climactic.</p> <p>Zamalek is a calm neighborhood with tree-lined streets, a number of embassies and some great dining opportunities. We ate (and lingered) at the open-air, chic and modern Sequoia Restaurant (53 Abou El Feda St.—intersection of Mohamed Mazhar St., Zamalek, Tel: 02-27350014, 010-3667000, http://www.sequoiaonline.net/). It’s a bit of a scene, so you may prefer to go at off-peak times, or at least be sure to reserve in advance. The food (a mix of international and Egyptian cuisine) is wonderful and the location on the shore of the northern tip of the island can’t be beat.</p>

Date	To	Time	Cost	Details
Fri, Jan 8	Cairo (Marriot)			<p>During our four full days in Cairo, we hired a private guide for one full day and one afternoon. It turns out that with three people it was about the same price for a private guide and driver as for a group tour with up to 9 people. I won't recount every last tourist destination in Cairo, as you should decide for yourself what to prioritize, how many museums to hit, how many mosques you need to see, etc. But to give you an idea of our schedule, our Friday tour went to Memphis, Saqqara and Giza (a full day, as none are right in Cairo and Cairo traffic slows you down quite a bit). Our Saturday afternoon tour stayed in central Cairo. We visited Khan el-Khalili market, Al Moez Street, Islamic Cairo and a number of its mosques, including Mosque of Ahmed Ibn Tulun (876 - 879 AD!) and Al-Azhar Mosque (970 AD!)</p> <p>On our second "on our own" day, we visited Coptic Cairo (the Christian neighborhood; there's also a synagogue) and its Hanging Church and Convent of St. George. Coptic Cairo is easily accessible by metro and a calm corner of the city that's easy to visit without a guide. Leave some time to relax, have some tea, enjoy the tranquility of the gardens.</p>
Sat, Jan 9	<p>Cairo (Marriot)</p> <p>A note on shopping: while I found most of the purchasable items outside of Cairo to be junk (some of which I bought anyways), the larger markets like Khan el-Khalili do have some hidden treasures, if you take care not to get ripped off. Don't always trust your guides to negotiate on your behalf. I was tempted to buy a nice set of Egyptian cotton sheets. The sheets at the Marriot were easily the best I've ever slept on and I asked about purchasing sheets from them—I believe the answer would have been yes except I asked too late! I looked at a few other shops, but discovered that for top quality Egyptian cotton, what I could find on the internet (at least for U.S. delivery) was actually cheaper.</p>			<p>On our first full evening in Cairo, despite our anti-tourist trap instincts, we signed up for the sound & light show at the Great Pyramid of Giza. We signed up through the Marriot so our transportation was included (worth it, as we didn't have to think about whether we were in the right place or not! Though you can sign up directly at sales@soundandlight.com.eg/ www.soundandlight.com.eg). It really was a spectacular first introduction to the pyramids, despite being on the cheesy side.</p> <p>Another evening, having discovered that tourist traps are not always bad, we decided to go on the dinner cruise on the Nile Maxim. It was entertaining enough, but the food was not so good and even the views from the river were not exactly riveting. I wouldn't bother.</p> <p>One evening, we met up with a friend of a friend who lives in Cairo and explored the famous Khan el-Khalili market and Al Moez Street. Even if you visit these spots during the day, I highly recommend going back again one evening. There's a different feel once the sun goes down and the buildings are lit up magnificently.</p>

Date	To	Time	Cost	Details
Sun, Jan 10	Day/evening in Cairo Fly Cairo to Madrid	11:45PM-3:45AM		<p>IB3735 Terminal 2 (Cairo) to Terminal 4S (Madrid) *Abby picks up suitcase in Terminal 4S</p> <p>We packed a lot into our 4 days in Cairo, but I should note that aside from the day of the all-day guided tour, we didn't leave the Marriott complex before noon. Mornings were to sleep in (for my friends) or to get up, head down to the pool and go back to sleep on a chaise longue in the sun (my preference). We also had dinner at one of the various Marriott restaurants almost every evening, either indoors or on the wonderful terrace. I really cannot stress enough how splurging (~US\$200/night per room) for the Marriott added a bit of relaxation and peace to what could otherwise be a stressful visit to a rather frantic city. If you are looking for hustle and bustle, you'll love Cairo wherever you end up staying. But I believe that my two friends and I all loved Cairo in large part because we chose the Marriott and we chose to visit many of the sights with a guide.</p>
Mon, Jan 11	Abby flies MAD-PAR I won't pretend that the overnight travel to get back to Paris was anything but fun—on top of it, my flight from Madrid to Paris was delayed 6 hours on the runway and they lost my suitcase! But I don't feel as though we had any days to spare, so it was still a worthwhile sacrifice.	07:20AM-09:35AM		<p>Check in opens 05:20 Closes 06:40 Madrid (Terminal 1) To Paris Charles de Gaulle (Terminal 2B) flight 3902 (07:20- 09:35)</p>

Next time? While each year I'm more and more inclined do "active" longer trips and not so inclined to do "sightseeing" trips, I'll definitely go back to Egypt one day. And here's what would be on my list:

- I'd bring a big, empty suitcase for shopping at the various markets like Khan el-Khalili.
- I'd make it a priority to see the Camel Market outside of Cairo (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/travelblogs/379/73491/The+Cairo+Camel+Market?destId=355224>).
- I'd sign up for a tour out into the Western Desert and its oases (Siwa, for example).
- I'd visit Aswan and if my budget allowed, splurge for one of the 5-star hotels for a night.
- I'd then take the Nile boat tour from Aswan to Luxor.
- I'd climb Mt. Sinai.
- I'd spend a few days on the Mediterranean coast, with a stop in Alexandria.