

TRAVEL

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Egyptian boys jump off an outcrop into the Mediterranean Sea near Alexandria, Egypt.

PHOTO: REUTERS

BEYOND

THE VALLEY OF THE KINGS

Away from the famous sites and Red Sea resorts, stretches of Egypt's coast are opening up to tourism

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The sky is bright blue, the sand bright white, the sea perfect, and there's not a soul on the beach. The only other visitors are a couple of young goatherds in fluttering white gowns or djellabas, and football shirts, who pose for me as they lead their blank-eyed charges to freshwater wells. Could this really be the Mediterranean?

Um el donya, the mother of the world, as the Egyptians call their country, has an embarrassment of attractions and sites that the world visits en masse, yet beyond the pyramids and tombs, Cairo and Luxor, glitzy Sharm el-Sheikh and the other diving and cruise hot spots on the Red Sea, there still remain superb areas that tourists are only just beginning to discover.

Some of the more adventurous independent travelers may take 4x4 rides into the desert, or explore the quieter hippy beaches of the Sinai, but now tour operators are also beginning to offer a different side of Egypt, and explore beaches that until now have been the preserve of the Egyptians.

Somehow, tourists have tended to overlook Egypt's other strip of coastline, along the Mediterranean, which stretches 930km from its borders with Gaza in the east and Libya to the west.

Alexandria, 200km northwest of Cairo, is undoubtedly the jewel of the Egyptian Med, and typically the one place tourists venture to on the coast. It's easy to see why, with its quaint colonial hotels and tea rooms such as Cafe de la Paix, the Cecil, the Cleopatra and Portofino revealing its history. There is also the 20km-long promenade running along the seafront, crowned by the New Bibliotheca Alexandrina, a commemoration of the original Library of Alexandria, the biggest library in antiquity. This joint venture between the Egyptian government and UNESCO, which opened its doors in 2002, is a super-modern architectural gem shaped as a round disk that represents the sun. It holds the collection that was founded by Ptolemy I in about 300 BC.

In a couple of years, a US\$140 million underwater museum that will include Cleopatra's palace is due to open too, adding to Alexandria's crown. The famous city is, of course, well worth visiting, but then so is the 500km of coast between here and the Libyan border — nothing but turquoise water and sleepy Bedouin country.

Accompanied only by my photographer and a crate of beer, I set off along this route in his red 1975 Land Cruiser. Alexandria's murky beach resorts are soon behind us, replaced by shepherds grazing their flocks on the roadsides — some even stop in the middle of the road to play football or say prayers, truly confident that God would protect them. In the distance, dark brown camels lope through palm gardens that surround spartan villages

of whitewashed houses. Little army outposts, tiny huts manned by bored young conscripts who spend more time collecting water by donkey than interrogating passersby, pock the northern coastline.

Our Land Cruiser refuses to budge past 60kph, so we have plenty of opportunity to peruse their frugal lodgings, while they watch us being overtaken by Toyota pick-ups full of waving kids.

It was on these white shores that Alexander the Great dipped his toes in the pristine waters in 331 BC, before turning inland through the Great Sand Sea to the oasis of Siwa, home of the Oracle of Amun, to whisper to the gods before making Egypt his own.

Just past the ritzy Porto Marina resort, 130km west of Alexandria, we come to the village of

El Alamein, scene of what Winston Churchill described as one of the defining battles of World War II, fought from Oct. 22 to Nov. 5 1942. We stop to walk among the 7,000 smooth cream tombstones of El Alamein Commonwealth war cemetery.

It is a further 160km to Marsa Matruh, a traditional Egyptian holiday town. In the high summer months of July and August, Marsa heaves with Egyptians on vacation, and the sidewalk cafes fill with men smoking scented tobacco in hookahs and women buying snacks. Throngs of kids leap into the waters of the 7km crescent-shaped bay, which includes Rommel's beach, where the Desert Fox plotted his battles as commander of the Afrika Korps.

They come, too, to see the ruins of temples from Ramses II, ancient Ptolemaic anchorages and cave drawings by early Coptic Christians, and to eat in the easygoing seafood restaurants that line the streets, serving fresh fish and calamari thrown on to hot coals, then dished up with salads, flat bread and egg plant dip.

Marsa is full of hotels, and we choose the modest Riviera Palace Hotel, with a foyer lined with lifebuoys and, weirdly, stuffed animals, and rooms with sea-facing balconies. There is also a new five-star complex, Jaz, 35km out of

town beside the sweeping white sands of Almaza beach, which has been designed with an eye to its Mediterranean competitors, featuring three chic resorts with pools and penthouses.

There are many quieter, less crowded beaches around Marsa, and off-season these are typically deserted. White chalk plateaus soften into strips of sand and taper gently into limpid waters. The best swimming spot we find lies 22km west on the main highway to Sollum at Agiba beach, where we see only a single hopeful fisherman. Somewhere out in the waters there, and off the coast near more remote towns such as Sidi Barrani and Sidi Abdel Rahman, lie other legacies of the world wars: old wrecks that are now explored by keen divers.

On the 210km drive west along the coast from Marsa to Sollum we pass more empty curves of white sand, and stop at a tiny Bedouin village beside one, where local men fish, farm figs and olives, and seem more open than many of the Egyptians I've met on the Nile delta. Their unveiled wives hold up dark-eyed babies for me to admire and laugh at my shabby Arabic, while the photographer drinks sweet tea with the men.

The only town of any note on this stretch is Sidi Barrani, a market town where we pick up bananas and sweet oranges for the drive.

Finally we reach the rough-and-ready border town of Sollum, with Libya just over the next ridge. We appear to be the only foreigners.

After checking in at the very basic Hotel Sert and eating a meal of grilled chicken, rice and hot, fresh flat bread, we visit Halfaya Sollum, a small Commonwealth war cemetery filled with South African headstones, and wander the town, meeting women with hands blackened with henna and tattoos on their chins and foreheads. They hold their children up for photographs, and ask to see pictures of our own relatives, grasping a snap of my little niece and nephew, kissing their faces and murmuring "*Yebarek fehom*" (Allah protect them).

Often we are addressed in a mess of Arabic-accented Italian, a reminder that nearby Libya was once an Italian colony. "I speak English, Egyptian and Italian," one man tells us. "Spaghetti, lasagne, cappuccino," he rattles off, while his mates laugh and urge us to buy their fresh fish.

It makes sense to spend at least a night at Sollum, where the border presents that delicious possibility: crossing over into yet more unknown, or turning south into the remote oases of western Egypt.

Most travelers coming to this coast for the first time will choose Alexandria or Marsa as a base. But with a little imagination and sense of adventure, you can see a totally different side of the country, and discover the deserted beaches and Bedouin villages that urbane Egyptians say are like the Red Sea's Sharm el-Sheikh 50 years ago.



Left: In April, archaeologist Zahi Hawass discovered this alabaster statue of Cleopatra, coins engraved with her image and a mask of Roman general Mark Anthony at the temple of Taposiris Magna in a western suburb of Alexandria, Egypt.

Below: A replica statue of a sphinx stands on a pier in the Eastern Harbor of Alexandria, Egypt.

PHOTOS: EPA AND BLOOMBERG NEWS

