

# Go Egypt

# Warming to a Red Sea resort

A beach holiday meant boredom for Sean Sheehan but Sharm el-Sheikh in Egypt changed all that

**A** HOLIDAY in Sharm el-Sheikh really does not appeal to me. The idea of a beach resort holiday suggests boredom. I mean, what do you do after lying on your back for an hour? Read another few chapters of the book you've packed? Turn over on the towel and get the other side of your body toasted?

No thanks, get me out of here, especially when "here" is the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh, a place where the sun received a severe shock last year because it rained for four hours one day, as opposed to the usual five-minute shower that occasionally falls across the baking hot land on the southern tip of Egypt's Sinai peninsula. I want a week's holiday not a 24/7 sauna.

"Get a life" admonished my companion, shoving factor 50-plus suntan lotion in my hand and saying how the dry heat around the Red Sea is perfect for al-fresco evenings at the restaurants and bars on the beach strip along Naama Bay. This is the nucleus of Sharm el-Sheikh, though the resort has spread to the east and west of Naama Bay, hugging the Red Sea coast all the way and enticing jaded folk in search of winter sun. The Russians love Sharm el-Sheikh and steely Russian women like to display their tattoos of anchors. I perk up.

I sit beside the window of the aircraft going out, for views of the Alps and then the Greek islands off the coast of Turkey before the plane makes a beeline for the coast of north Africa and Cairo. I'm sure I can make out Tahrir Square but no one believes me, although there is no doubting the veracity

behind my excited finger pointing when the Suez Canal comes into view.

The last hour of the journey is spent crossing the mountains of the Sinai before a patch of flat sand and palm trees suddenly appear and the plane banks and glides down onto the runway.

**DAY ONE AND** the first languid session on a sun lounger. My doorstep of a book, Mahfouz's *The Cairo Trilogy*, should get me through the first couple of days and I'm just getting into its 1,300 pages, and thinking of escaping on a day trip to Cairo, when I'm dragged off to a shop to buy a snorkel and mask.

Pleasantly surprised by only having to pay €7, I reluctantly agree



to try snorkelling. I'm not comfortable in water and a little shortsighted but here comes a surprise. There is no need for fins because there is little current and startlingly coloured fish abound within metres of the shore. The hotel has its own pontoon and from the end of it I slide elegantly into the gorgeously warm waters of a marine paradise.

I am smitten. Attractive women with anchor tattoos are for-

**Clockwise from above: beach scene, Sharm el-Sheikh; snorkelling; nightlife; Sharm el-Sheikh harbour; and water pipes, Old Market. Below: volleyball on the beach. Left: masked butterflyfish.**

Photographs: Doug Allan, Slow Images, Peter Macdiarmid/Getty Images, Dan Kitwood/Getty Images, Nicholas Pitt/Photodisc, Khaled Desouki/AFP/Getty Images, and Borat Furlan/WaterFrame

gotten about and a snorkelling trip to Ras Mohammad National Park yields an even more astonishing range of exotic-looking fish and amazing coral.

The logical next step is signing up for an introductory scuba-diving course. I am tempted but lose my nerve and cowardly agree to sit in on the tuition that begins in a classroom and then observe the training session in a pool from the safety of a deckchair. I follow my companion

## Sharm el-Sheikh where to . . .

### Stay

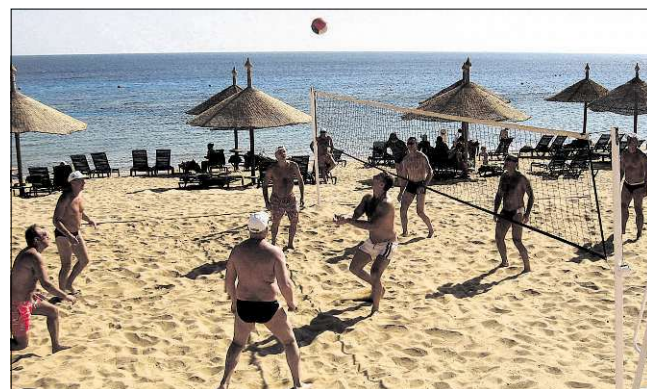
There is a huge range of hotels, from five-star luxury to middle-of-the-road three-star. [sharm-el-sheikh-hotels.com](http://sharm-el-sheikh-hotels.com), [savoy-sharm.com](http://savoy-sharm.com).

### Eat

Three-course meal at a quality restaurant, like Little Buddha or the Ritz-Carlton, costs about €35. Dinner at Al Fresco or Pomodoro is from around €20.

### Go

Entertainment at Soho Square ([soho-sharm.com](http://soho-sharm.com)) attracts crowds every evening. For late night revelry head for the disco at Little Buddha



([littlebuddha-sharm.com](http://littlebuddha-sharm.com)).

### Getting around

Along the main road that runs parallel to the beach, from White Knight Beach in the west to the Old Market of Sharm in the east (with Naama Bay in the middle),

taxi drivers think they're in a car-racing video game and drive accordingly. Bargain hard to approach the fare locals pay.

It's more fun, and costs less, to travel with locals by flagging down one of the many blue-and-white minivans that

travel up and down the road until midnight.

### Snorkelling

Avoid Naama Bay in favour of White Knight Bay to the west or the Om El Seed peninsula on the other side. A half-day trip to Ras Mohammad National Park costs €17 ([sharm-club.com](http://sharm-club.com)) and a day cruise trip with lunch is €28 ([sharmdaytours.com](http://sharmdaytours.com)).

### Scuba-diving

A half-day PADI (Professional Association of Diving Instructors) discover scuba-diving course at Camel Dive ([cameldive.com](http://cameldive.com)) costs €95. Camel Dive offers a range of PADI courses and diving trips to the wreck of the SS *Thistlegorm*, a merchant navy vessel sunk by German bombers in 1941.



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and the instructor down to the beach, watch them don the gear and say a silent goodbye as they wade into the sea, gradually submerge and disappear. Now hooked on *The Cairo Trilogy*, I am distracted for an hour and miss the James Bond moment when they emerge dripping sea water.

"Awesome" exclaims my enraptured companion, after completion of an introductory half-day course, and for once the

## Get there

Fly from London/Manchester with return fares from €345 in November, and around €240 in December and January. Flights and hotel packages (B&B) are from around €628pp for a week in November, and from around €400 for a week in December and January. [monarch.co.uk](http://monarch.co.uk), [firstchoice.co.uk](http://firstchoice.co.uk), [thomascook.com](http://thomascook.com).

word seems justified. The price for being chicken-hearted is to be ignored as the two divers excitedly tick off from a coloured chart the objects of their visual intoxication: batfish, giant trevally, blue-spotted stingray, parrotfish, lionfish and, looking like an ironed-out sea horse, the snake pipefish.

**SHARM EL-SHEIKH** is a family-friendly resort and there are plenty of activities away from

the sea: ice-skating and bowling at Soho Square, camel rides (as uncomfortable as they look), Bedouin dinners (very touristy) and trips across the bleak and rocky desert to St Catherine's Monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai. What is fun is dressing up to sip cocktails at the bar in the Ritz-Carlton before enjoying first-class Middle Eastern cuisine at the restaurant downstairs. Other good nights are spent listening to live music at

the Al Fresco buffet in the grounds of the Hilton Fayrouz and tucking into excellent fusion food at Little Buddha, available until 1am and with sushi served until an hour before its lively disco closes at 4am. The Pomodoro restaurant and the adjoining Indian restaurant in Naama are also to be recommended. How surprising to be pleasantly surprised. Now I want to return to Sharm el-Sheikh.

## MY DAY

### JULIE ARDOIN – CABIN CREW, EMIRATES

I'M FROM Dublin but, like a lot of cabin crew, I've a fairly multinational background. My Mum is from Cavan but my Dad is French and a diplomat, which meant we moved countries every six years. I've lived all over.

Prior to joining Emirates two-and-a-half years ago I was an IT recruitment consultant.

I'm based in Dubai and spend half my month there and half travelling.

We fly to 115 destinations and on the 22nd of each month I'll get my roster.

The first thing I'll do is check what's on in each city I'm visiting and get in touch with friends to say I'm on my way.

I'm just back from an eight-day schedule from Dubai to Bangkok, Sydney, Christchurch, Sydney again, Bangkok and Dubai, with 24 and 48-hour layovers along the way.

On other occasions it could be short run flights, such as Muscat or Doha, where I'd be there and back in a day.

I've always loved



**Julie Ardoin: "I love meeting people from so many different cultures, and hearing their stories"**

travelling. Very often for my holidays I'll head back to an Emirates destination to explore it in more depth.

This year I spent two weeks in New Zealand.

For each flight the first thing we do is have a briefing to introduce yourself to the other crew members.

We have over 3,000 cabin crew and are recruiting all the time so you're constantly meeting new people.

We also need to know what languages and special skills the people you are flying with might have.

We have some doctors and nurses who gave up their former jobs in order to travel and they're always good to know on a flight, even though the training we all get in first aid is pretty rigorous. We even learn how to deliver babies.

I work in business class so, once on-board, I'll do safety and equipment checks and then see from the passenger list who is sitting where and be ready to greet them and take their jackets.

We get all sorts, from business people to honeymooners and families with kids.

I love meeting people from so many different cultures, and hearing their stories.

You wouldn't go hungry in

business class so I'm up and down serving drinks and food a lot. It's good exercise.

If it's a long flight we have our own on-board sleeping quarters.

I'm so used to it now I can fall asleep in seconds and be back working within minutes of waking up.

On layovers the crew will usually hang out together. Someone will have been there before so you'll be told where's the best place to go for a massage in one city or to shop in another.

When we land back in Dubai we collect our case from the crew terminal and an Emirates shuttle bus brings us the 10-minute trip to our accommodation complex. We're well looked after like that.

■ In conversation with Sandra O'Connell