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Dan Morey's guides

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Essential Luxor

Families
History
Backpackers

Luxor. The very name conjures up images of crumbling temples, dusty tombs and mysterious hieroglyphics. It was here that archeologist Howard Carter became the first man in over 3,000 years to gaze into the burial crypt of King Tutankhamun. What did he see? “Wonderful things.” You too can see wonderful things in Luxor: the Theban Necropolis, where thousands of New Kingdom officials, priests, nobles and royals were buried; Karnak, the largest religious complex ever constructed; Luxor Temple with its colossal pylons and statues and obelisk. This guide includes the best ancient sites in Luxor, as well as practical information about lodging, restaurants and transportation.

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Ramesseum Rest House

Mortuary Temple of Rameses II | West Bank, Old Gurna, Luxor, Egypt

This cafe is right across from the Ramesseum and has been owned by the same family for generations. And not just any family. The famous Rasuls of Gurna discovered the Deir el Bahri cache of royal mummies, and sold a number of its artifacts before being caught by Gaston Maspero in 1881. One member of the family, Sheik Hussein Abdel Rasul, was a water boy on Howard Carter's team, and was one of the first people to see King Tut's tomb. He survived the curse and lived to be 87. Great shady cafe for beer, tea or a snack. Lots of framed newspaper clippings from the family's past.

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Colossi of Memnon

Luxor, Luxor Governorate, Egypt

These statues of Amenhotep III were part of his mortuary temple (near Medinet Habu, on the west bank) and are over 50 feet tall. The pharaoh is seated and small figures of his mother and his wife (Queen Tiyi) can be found at his side. The carvings on the bases of the colossi show the uniting of Upper and Lower Egypt. They are named after the Greek myth of Memnon because damage from an earthquake caused the northern statue to “sing” at sunrise (Memnon speaking to his mother, Dawn). When the damage was repaired by the Romans in the 3rd century, the strange whistling ceased.

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Luxor Temple

Central Luxor

In Theban times, this cult temple played an important role in the Opet fertility festival. A statue of Amun was delivered in a ceremonial bark from Karnak temple to Luxor temple via the Avenue of Sphinxes. You can see a bark shrine in Luxor temple today, along with colossal statues of Ramesses II and a wonderfully preserved red granite obelisk. Part of the temple was destroyed to build an Islamic mosque during the Fatimid dynasty, and it's still a functioning place of worship. A festival is even held there in which boats are paraded, echoing the ancient Opet procession.

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Ramesseum

Luxor, Luxor, Egypt

Ramesses II never missed an opportunity to glorify himself. He put up temples, obelisks and colossal statues from one end of Egypt to the other. The Ramesseum is his mortuary temple. A 55-foot-tall colossus of the Trump-like Pharaoh was brought in a single piece all the way from Aswan to decorate it. The statue eventually fell, and a description of its collapsed remains by a Roman historian inspired Percy Bysshe Shelley to compose his famous poem "Ozymandias" about the inevitable fading of all earthly glory. The view of this fallen king from the shadows of the hypostyle hall is unforgettable.

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Karnak Temple

El-Karnak, Luxor, Luxor Governorate, Egypt

The Temple of Karnak is the largest religious complex ever built. It's comprised of numerous temples, dedicated to the Theban Triad (Amun, Mut, and their son Khonsu). Each of these gods has their own precinct in Karnak. Highlights include the great hypostyle hall (columns in the middle row tower 80 feet), a beautiful sacred lake where you're likely to spot kingfishers and other birds, Queen Hatshepsut's obelisk, and an avenue of ram-headed sphinxes. A famous scene in Agatha Christie's "Death on the Nile" takes place at Karnak.

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Temple of Hatshepsut

Kings Valley Rd, Qesm Al Wahat Al Khargah, New Valley Governorate, Egypt

This incredible mortuary temple was designed by the architect Senemut for Hatshepsut, a powerful 18th Dynasty queen, who ruled Egypt as Pharaoh. The way this terraced temple harmonizes with its natural surroundings (massive limestone cliffs) is stunning, and inspired the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, among many other modern architects. The gods Horace and Hathor are represented throughout, as is the divine birth of Hatshepsut (her mother is shown seated with Amun-Ra). The walk up the long, stone ramp to the top colonnade is one you'll never forget.

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Baladi Ferry

Ferry Dock near Luxor Temple, Luxor, Egypt

The municipal ferry is the cheapest way to reach the west bank of the Nile River in Luxor. It only costs one Egyptian pound, but there is no set schedule. You won't have to wait long, however, since all the locals use it (they only pay 25pt) and it tends to fill up fairly quickly. Don't listen to the motor launch touts who hang out around the ferry dock and tell you the ferry isn't running or tourists aren't allowed to use it. They just want you to cross in their boat and spend more money. People on the ferry are friendly, though you might run into a taxi tout or two.

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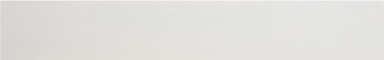

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Luxor Water Taxis

Nile River, Luxor, Egypt

These picturesque motorboats whisk you across the Nile for around 5 Egyptian pounds, depending on your negotiating skills, making them a more costly (but faster) alternative to the municipal ferry (1 Egyptian pound). You will find them clustered along the banks of the Nile at various central locations, and the captains will gladly take you on extended trips as well. Since our West Bank apartment was close to the water taxis, we usually crossed with Captain Ahmed and came back via the municipal ferry. Once you develop a relationship with a captain he will be looking for you every morning and you'll get his best price.

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WINTER PALACE

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Sofitel Winter Palace Luxor

Corniche El Nile St, Luxor, Egypt

This grande dame of the Nile opened in 1907 and was Lord Carnarvon's home base during the excavation of Tutankhamun's tomb, which he financed. The hotel was also a popular winter retreat for European royalty, including Albert and Elisabeth of Belgium. You'll feel a bit like royalty yourself here. The Winter Palace is a luxurious sanctuary with lush, shady gardens, swimming pools, tennis courts, and five restaurants. Have a cocktail on the terrace and watch the sun set over the Nile. Perfection.

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Gaddis & Co

Nile Street, Luxor, Egypt

Gaddis & Co has been trading on Luxor's corniche since 1907. It's located in a prime spot beneath the veranda of the Winter Palace Hotel, so prices are a tad high on some items, but believe me, you won't mind, because the Gaddis policy is not to hassle shoppers in any way. You can actually leaf through books and browse souvenirs without a haggling shopkeeper breathing down your neck. Every item has a price tag! The store's founder, Attaya Gaddis, was a renowned photographer, and you can pick up prints of his historic photos here, along with a seemingly endless array of gifts, books, clothes and jewelry. A true oasis in Luxor. Closed from June 1 to August 15 yearly.

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Valley of the Nobles

Abd al-Gurna, Luxor, Egypt

Part of the Theban Necropolis on Luxor's west bank, the Valley of Nobles contains over 1,000 tombs. Nobles, officials and priests were buried here, and the tomb paintings depict aspects of their daily lives. These sites are less visited than those in the Valley of Kings and the Valley of Queens, so there are seldom lines. Highlights are the tomb of Nakht (royal scribe, 18th dynasty), the tomb of Sennefer (Mayor of Thebes), and my favorite, the tomb of Ramose. Ramose was a vizier during Akhenaten's reign, and his tomb features the unique art of that period. The funerary banquet scene is a masterpiece.

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Tomb of Ramses IX (KV6)

Valley of the Kings

The tomb of Ramses IX (KV6) was cut into the side of a hill, and has one of the most accessible entrances in the Valley of the Kings. When Ramses IX died, his tomb was not yet completed, so some of the walls were left undecorated. Plenty of art was finished, however, including a wonderful astronomical ceiling that depicts the goddess Nut swallowing the sun in the evening (she will give birth to it again in the morning). When the tomb was discovered, the pharaoh's mummy wasn't inside. It was found later, in 1881, in the famous Deir al-Bahri cache.

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Mark Fischer flickr

Mummification Museum

ش كورنيش النيل، Luxor, Luxor Governorate, Egypt

This museum, dedicated to the ancient practice of mummification, has two sections. The first explains the stages a dead person goes through while being mummified, followed by his voyage to the afterlife. Illustrations are based on paintings from Egyptian tombs. Artifacts in the second section include coffins with amazing winged Isis figures, along with tools and canopic jars that were used in mummification. There are actual mummies as well, in addition to various mummified animals (crocodile, baboon, cat, etc.) Don't miss the severed human head, split in half to show its mummified interior. The museum is on the corniche, close to Luxor temple.

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Luxor Feluccas

Nile River, Luxor, Egypt

Feluccas are traditional wooden boats with tall, triangular sails. You can find them on both the east and west banks of the Nile River at Luxor, and book them for cruises, sightseeing, even fishing. We went for a sunset cruise on the "So Shy" with Captain Badwy and his mate, which was wonderfully relaxing. They made us karkade, a tart herbal tea made from hibiscus. Watching them work the massive oars, or climb to the top of the mast to unfurl the sheet was quite a sight: the art of boating at its most ancient. Also did a fishing trip with Badwy: caught lots of tilapia and other small fish.

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Avenue of Sphinxes

Luxor, Luxor, Egypt

The Avenue of Sphinxes connects Karnak and Luxor temples and was once trod by pharaohs, priests and revelers in the annual Opet procession. The sections closest to the temples are in the best condition and are lined with well-preserved ram-headed and woman-headed sphinxes. All 1.7 miles of the avenue are currently under excavation. Buildings have been razed to restore the road that will once again connect the two great temples. The walk is long and hot, so I suggest taking a caleche along the route; the driver will stop wherever you want, and might even provide a bit of historical narration.

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Jamboree

Market Street (Right in the souk), Luxor, Egypt

Jamboree has both indoor and outdoor seating. The outside tables are on a balcony overlooking the souk, so you have a great view of all the wheeling and dealing going on down below. They offer a selection of international dishes (pasta, cottage pie, baked potatoes, Greek salad), as well as a very tasty array of tagines, kofta, and kebabs. There's a barbeque featuring char-grilled chicken, veal, beef and pigeon. Prices are very reasonable (check out the budget steaks), for this central location.

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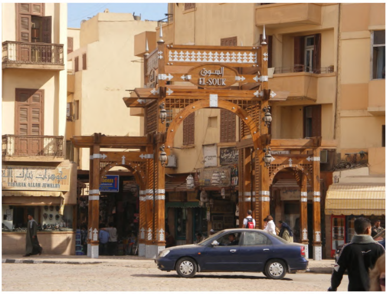

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Luxor Souk (Market)

Luxor Center, Luxor, Egypt

The entrance to the Luxor Souk is marked by a wooden gate near Luxor Temple. The first section is geared toward tourists and features decoratively paved streets and some nice restaurants. You'll know when you reach the local section when you start to see donkeys and live poultry and vendors sitting on the dusty ground amid piles of vegetables. This is the more atmospheric area, and of course prices are much better. Wherever you shop in the souk, be prepared to haggle. If you show interest in an item, some merchants will follow you for blocks until a price is agreed on.

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Nile River Cruise

Nile River, Luxor, Egypt

The Nile is the heart of Egypt, and to understand the country's history and culture you must get out on the river. Along its banks you'll see fertile farmlands, ancient temples, fishermen flinging nets, kids splashing in the water, and a variety of birds and animals, from ibises and egrets to water buffaloes and camels. Most cruises are 3 nights to a week and travel between Luxor and Aswan with stops at temples like Edfu, Philae and Kom Ombo. Ships can be modern cruise-ships or antique sailing vessels (dahabiyas); there are even a few old paddle wheelers plying the route.

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Luxor Railway Station
LUXOR
LUXOR

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Luxor Train Station

Midan al-Mahatta, Luxor, Egypt

Many tourists choose to fly from Luxor to visit Aswan or Cairo, but the train is much cheaper and you get to meet locals and see more of the country. I've used the daytime express train to get to Aswan, and Abela's deluxe overnight sleeper twice for Cairo. Get tickets for the day train (express, not slow) from the conductor or have an Egyptian buy them for you ahead of time; counter agents generally won't sell to tourists for this train. The deluxe sleeper is not as posh as it sounds (grubby bathrooms, occasional bugs), but you do get two meals and air conditioning. Luxor station, designed in neo-pharaonic style, is modern, with a tourist desk, luggage check and post office.

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WELCOM TO EYE HOUSE

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Eyehouse

Ramla, West Bank, Luxor

These spacious apartments on the west bank of the Nile include use of a swimming pool in the courtyard. Our flat had two bedrooms, a wraparound balcony, access to a rooftop terrace and satellite TV-- all for a very good price. The kitchen had everything we needed. The neighborhood is quiet (except for the donkey who resides across the street), and just steps from the river, with easy access to public and private ferries. The property is owned by a Danish woman, Inge, and managed by an Egyptian man, Osman. Ramadan does odd jobs and will get you bread, beer, or whatever else you need.

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Luxor Caleches

Luxor, Egypt

These traditional, horse-drawn carriages are plentiful in the tourist areas of central Luxor. As you walk down the road you will hear the drivers calling "Caleche! Caleche!" If you decide to go for a ride, you must negotiate the price, and be aware that the driver will expect baksheesh (a tip) when the trip is finished. The most popular destination is Karnak Temple, which is just a bit too far to comfortably walk from downtown. Ask the driver to take you along the Avenue of Sphinxes on the way.

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Abu Haggag Mosque

Saad Zaghloul St, Luxor, Egypt

This Fatimid-era (13th Century) mosque is located inside the first court of Luxor Temple, and remains an active place of worship. After the ancient Egyptian religion died out, Luxor temple was used as a Roman shrine. Later, a series of Christian basilicas were built there. These were ultimately replaced by the Abu Haggag mosque, making Luxor Temple a sanctuary of continuous spiritual activity for 35 centuries. The mosque is named for Sheikh Yusuf al-Haggag, the Father of the Pilgrimage, who died in Luxor in 1245 A.D. Every year on his birthday (early November), a festival is held at the mosque. Celebrants parade sacred boats and engage in wild "stick fighting" dances.

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Gezira Garden Restaurant

البر الغربي، الأقصر، Luxor, Egypt

This restaurant is located in the Gezira Gardens Hotel/Apartment complex on the west bank of Luxor (Gezira town), and hosts a popular Egyptian Party on its rooftop terrace. The food is traditional Egyptian (kofta, Bamya, etc.) or international and very good. Try the Egyptian wine. The band features an old Egyptian string instrument called the oud, a keyboard, two singers and percussion. Dancing is encouraged, so be prepared to get down with some energetic locals, inebriated Germans and a professional belly dancer.

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Nile Valley Hotel Restaurant

Gesirat El Bairat West Bank Luxor | West Bank Luxor, Luxor, Egypt

Great rooftop restaurant in Gezira town (west bank of Luxor). I love to go here in the evening for supper (excellent eggplant, kofta and fish), then linger over an Egyptian Stella or three as night descends on the Nile. Ibises fly in formation overhead, feluccas sail by, and Luxor Temple, across the river, begins to glow. Also a cool place to get out of the noonday sun for lunch. Service is always friendly, never rushed. Rooftop dining at its best.

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Medinat Habu

West Bank, Luxor, Egypt

The mortuary temple of Ramesses III is notable for its well-preserved (still colorful) decor and its depictions of the pharaoh's defeat of the mysterious invaders known as the Sea Peoples. No one knows where the Sea Peoples came from, but Ramesses III beat them in three separate 12th century BC campaigns. The most vivid art (vultures, falcons, ankhs, etc.) in Medinet Habu can be seen on the columns and ceiling. I also like the Ramesses-shaped columns in the open-air peristyle hall, and the migdol (gate house) entrance.

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Howard Carter House

Near the Valley of the Kings, West Side, Luxor, Egypt

Howard Carter, the British archaeologist who discovered King Tutankhamun's tomb, lived in this house while he was carrying out his excavations in the Valley of the Kings. Lots of original furniture and items remain in the house from the 1920s, including Carter's traveling trunk, fly whisk, telephone and phonograph. A young lady showed us around, then asked if we wanted to see a movie. This turned out to be a hologram of "Howard Carter." He paced about the room and perched on the edge of his desk as he related the story of King Tut's tomb. Loved it!

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Luxor Temple Square

Luxor Governorate, Egypt

This paved square outside Luxor Temple offers great views of the temple and Abu Haggag Mosque. There are only a few trees around the edges of the square, so it can get pretty hot on sunny days. Families hang out here, chatting and eating (snack vendors are often present), while kids run and play. There are a couple small greenswards, though the grass can be a bit sparse during dry stretches. In the middle of the square there are some archeological excavations on view which can be entered through the temple.

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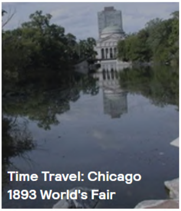

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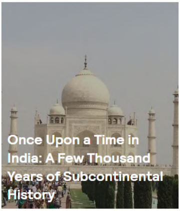

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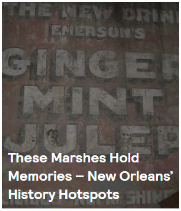

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