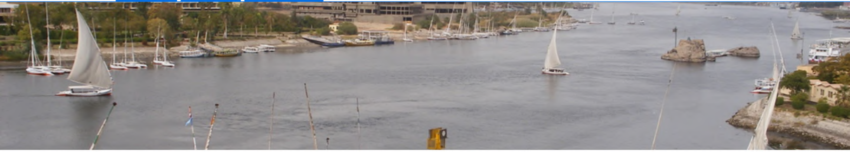

List view
Map view

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Exploring Aswan

Backpackers History Students

The ancient city of Aswan lies on the Nile River, beside the first cataract, in Upper Egypt. In Pharaonic times it was known as Swenett and was the kingdom's southernmost outpost. Egypt was said to begin there. Back then, Aswan was famous for its stone quarries, and many of the monuments in Egypt, from the Pyramids to Abu Simbel were hewn from its granite. Today, it's also known for modern wonders, like the Aswan High Dam, and for the vibrant Nubian culture that thrives there. It also makes an ideal base to explore the storied temples at Abu Simbel, Philae, Kom Ombo and Edfu.

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Temples of Abu Simbel

Aswan Governorate, Egypt

The Abu Simbel temples are 185 miles south of Aswan. To get there we had to join a caravan (with military protection) very early in the morning (like 3 A.M.). The two temples, famously moved, piece by piece, when the Aswan High Dam was built, are an unforgettable sight. The Great Temple is a testament to the outsize ego of Ramses II and features 4 colossal seated statues of the king. The smaller temple honors his wife, Nefertari. The statues at the entrance depict the pharaoh and his wife, and are all the same height, a unique occurrence in royal Egyptian art, where statues of queens are seldom higher than their husbands' knees.

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مصنون هوتيل
MEMNON HOTEL

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Memnon Hotel

Nile Street Above The National Bank, Aswan 81111, Egypt

The Memnon is a cheap 2 star hotel right on the Nile Corniche in the heart of Aswan. We walked there from the train station, though we didn't have much luggage. The door is around the back of the building and the hotel lobby is one floor up. Things are a bit grungy in this area, and the rooms have seen better days, but the view you get of the Nile is worth the price alone. The staff is friendly and can help you book any tours you'd like, most at very good rates. Free breakfast, too. If you're on a budget you really can't beat the Memnon.

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Lake Nasser

Aswan

This 2,030 square mile reservoir was formed when Gamal Abdul Nasser (2nd President of Egypt) constructed the Aswan High Dam to stop the annual, often destructive, flooding of the Nile River. President Anwar Sadat finished the project in 1970. A number of archaeological sites were flooded and now lie beneath the waters of Lake Nasser. Luckily, the great temples of Abu Simbel were moved to higher ground. Lake Nasser is an excellent place to hook a Nile Perch, which grow to monstrous proportions, but watch out for crocodiles if you're shore fishing.

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Temple of Philae

Philae, Aswan, Egypt

Philae is another Upper Egyptian temple that had to be moved when the Nile was dammed. The temple, dedicated to Isis, was transported from its original location, Philae Island, to nearby Agilqiyya Island and positioned exactly as it had been on Philae. There are numerous boats waiting to ferry you over, and it's a wonderful trip. The temple, ringed with vegetation on its lonely island in the Nile is, like the goddess it honors, a thing of beauty. Because Isis remained popular well into Roman times, Philae is believed to be the last place where the Ancient Egyptian religion was practiced.

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Aswan High Dam

Aswan

The Aswan High Dam isn't a thrilling sight, even as dams go, but from an engineering standpoint, it's a marvel. Completed in 1970, the dam controls the dangerous flooding of the Nile River and creates a great deal of hydroelectric power in the process. Its twelve generators produce 2.1 gigawatts of power and bring electricity to many small villages. The large reservoir that was created (Lake Nasser) provides water for irrigation and protection against drought. A very interesting visit, with some beautiful views of the lake.

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Egyptian Russian Friendship Monument

Manteqet as Sad Al Aali, Qism Aswan, Aswan Governorate, Egypt

The Egyptian Russian Friendship Monument (also known as the Lotus Flower) was erected close to the Aswan High Dam in 1971 as a gesture of thanks to the Soviet Union, who helped finance the dam. It stands over 230 feet tall and represents the five petals of a lotus flower. The center pylon features both the Egyptian and Russian coat of arms. There is an observation platform, which offers excellent views of the dam and Lake Nasser. Entrance is free.

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Unfinished Obelisk

Aswan, Qism Aswan, Aswan Governorate, Egypt

This massive obelisk would've been the largest in Egypt (over 130 feet) if it had been finished. Quarry workers carved the obelisk directly from bedrock, but abandoned the project when it began to crack. You can still see their chisel marks. Queen Hatshepsut commissioned the obelisk, possibly for Karnak Temple in Luxor. It's amazing to walk around this old quarry and imagine it in ancient times. It's as if the stoneworkers just stepped out for lunch and could be back at any minute to resume their work.

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The Fatimid Cemetery

Al Gabana Al Fatemeya, Sheyakhah Oula, Qism Aswan, Aswan Governorate, Egypt

This cemetery dates back to the Fatimid Dynasty (909-1171 A.D.) and has some tombs as old as the 7th century. Many are tall mud-brick affairs with domes that are unique to Aswan. If you see a flag on a grave it means that a saint is buried there. Locals will often be found praying to these saints. The cemetery is right across the street from the Unfinished Obelisk. There is no charge to enter, but if a caretaker (or one of the kids who hang out there) shows you around he will expect a tip.

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Temple of Kom Ombo
Aswan, Egypt

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Temple of Kom Ombo

Kom Ombo, Aswan, Egypt

Kom Ombo is just north of Aswan (30 miles) and is easily reached by car. There are also numerous tour operators in Aswan who take small groups to surrounding temples for very reasonable prices. Most Nile cruises will also stop here. The temple is from the Greco-Roman period and dedicated to two gods: Horus and Sobek, the crocodile god. There used to be a lot of voracious Nile crocs in the area, so the locals made offerings to Sobek for protection. Each god has its own separate side in this symmetrical temple, which is quite unusual.

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Cafeteria Venus

Nagoa Ash Shatb, Markaz Deraw, Aswan Governorate, Egypt

This is pretty much the only food option at the Temple of Kom Ombo, and it's a great one. Nestled beside the Nile, under swaying palms, Cafeteria Venus offers up homemade local Egyptian food (nothing fancy) in a very pleasant atmosphere. The huge, tasseled umbrellas that overhang the tables give the cafe a distinct look that you can't miss from the road. Great place to relax with a beer after a long morning of touring temples in the hot Aswan sun.

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Temple of Edfu

Markaz Edfo Aswan, Egypt

Edfu is a couple hours drive from Aswan, but well worth the effort. You can hire a taxi in Aswan and stop at Kom Ombo on the way to Edfu. This will allow you to see two great temples on one side trip. The temple at Edfu (finished in 57 B.C.) is dedicated to the god Horus, and it's spectacular...the most intact ancient Egyptian temple I've seen. The walk through the dark interior to the sanctuary is right out of

Indiana Jones. Here you'll encounter the sacred Barque of Horus, used in the God's annual procession.

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Sofitel Legend Old Cataract Aswan

Abtal El Tahrir Street, Aswan, Egypt

One of Egypt's legendary hotels, the Old Cataract was named for the nearby cataracts on the Nile River. These cataracts are not waterfalls, but shallow white water areas with lots of boulders. The hotel was opened by Thomas Cook (of Cook Tours) in 1899. Winston Churchill and Czar Nicholas stayed at the Old Cataract, as did Agatha Christie, who wrote her novel Death on the Nile here. A new wing was built in 1961, but the old "Palace" wing still has 76 rooms and 45 suites. The Old Cataract's restaurant, 1902, specializes in fine French cuisine.

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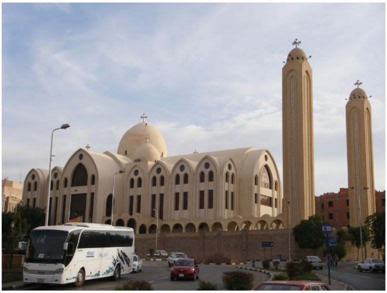

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Archangel Michael's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral

Ferial Square, Aswan, Egypt

Archangel Michael's is one of the larger, newer Coptic Orthodox Cathedrals in southern Egypt. In fact, the congregation is still raising money to completely finish it (no stained glass yet). The exterior features two white towers, a dome, and an arched facade. Inside, a large image of Jesus (Christ as Pantocrator) resides beneath the dome, as it does in most orthodox churches. Staff here are very welcoming, and will happily show you around. There is some amazing woodwork on display.

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Panorama Restaurant

Corniche El Nil St | El Corniche, Aswan, Egypt

Very atmospheric restaurant right on the banks of the Nile. The walls are covered with decorative Nubian trinkets, and there are primitive spears affixed to the ceiling. The chairs are rich wood and most of the tables have fresh flower arrangements (Bird of Paradise predominates). We sat outside, on the terrace, and felt like we were having a riverside picnic. Feluccas, water taxis and cruise ships passed by as we ate our Egyptian stews and drank herbal tea. Great food and a great experience!

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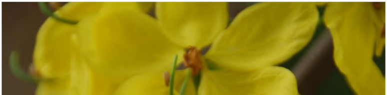

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Aswan Botantical Gardens

Aswan

The Botanical Gardens are located on El Nabatat, the smaller of Aswan's two Nile islands. The appropriately named Elephantine is much larger. Nabatat used to be owned by Lord Kitchener (a Consul-General of Egypt during colonial times) and you will still hear it referred to as Kitchener's Island. The whole island is only 2,460 feet long, and entirely composed of exotic plants and trees imported by Kitchener. The grounds are nicely landscaped with paved paths, terraces, and a stepped landing area for the feluccas that will deliver you.

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Elephantine Island

Middle of Nile River, Aswan

This large island in the Nile got its name from one of three sources: an elephant cult that operated there in predynastic times, the ancient Greek name Abu (Elephant Land), or my favorite possibility, the three big boulders near the water that look like Elephant butts. There are excavations of an ancient town and temples (dedicated to flood gods), some Nubian villages (expect curious kids and invitations to tea), a museum, an old Nilometer (flood gauge) and a big resort. Fun place to explore.

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McDonald's

Kornish Al Nile, Sheyakhah Thalethah, Qism Aswan, Aswan Governorate, Egypt

This circular, multi-story McDonald's is right on the banks of the Nile River. There are terraces on each floor for outdoor dining with an unbeatable river view. Food is standard McDonald's (with a few Egyptian additions to the menu), but it's fast and cheap. Even if you don't want a full meal, it's great to sit on the terrace and enjoy an ice cream or coffee. The staff is very friendly and efficient. Music tends to be American: Train when we stopped in.

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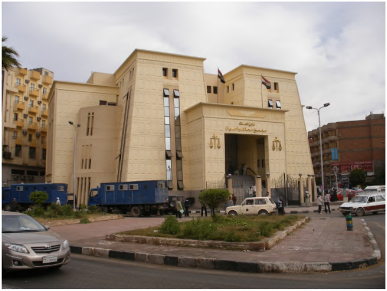

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Aswan Elementary Court

Corniche El Nil St., Downtown, Qism Aswan, Aswan Governorate, Egypt

This modern courthouse was built in the neo-pharaonic style with a pylon design and winged bird over the entrance. There are scale of justice representations on the facade and a decorative spiked gate. Very cool building, but don't expect to get inside. Security is pretty tight at the courthouse since a gang of gunmen stormed it back in 2012. The five men, armed with automatic weapons, managed to break out two drug-dealer relatives (just sentenced) and whisk them away.

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El-characterization Mosque (El-Tabia Mosque)

Kwanza Aswan - Aswan, Dr Abd Al Rady Hanafe ', Qism Aswan, Aswan Governorate, Egypt

This mosque sits on a hill in the middle of Aswan and is visible from almost anywhere in the city. There are two tall minarets, a central dome, entrance arches with white columns, and a stone staircase. Inside, the prayer hall features a massive, gorgeous chandelier depending from the ornate dome, above a green patterned carpet. A lovely park surrounds the mosque with terraced gardens and flowering bushes. At night the mosque is illuminated, an enchanting beacon on high.

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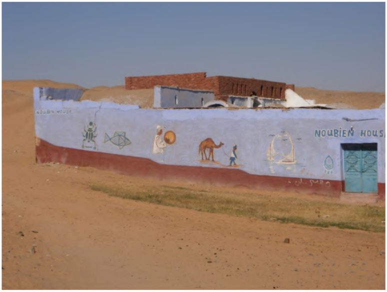

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Nubian Villages

Aswan, Egypt

There are numerous Nubian villages around Aswan, some as close as Elephantine Island. Many Nubians were forced to move north when their villages were flooded by Lake Nasser after the construction of the Aswan High Dam. Nubian houses are brightly painted and often sans-roof (not much rain in Aswan) Residents like to invite you into their homes for a look-around. Be aware that if you partake of their karkade (hibiscus tea) or Shamsi (bread), baksheesh (tip) will be expected in return. If this type of invitation turns you off, stick to the less touristic villages, like Gharb Aswan.

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Tombs of the Nobles

Abu AR Rish Qebli, Qism Aswan, Aswan Governorate, Egypt

As in Luxor, the tombs of Aswan are located on the west bank of the Nile, closest to the setting sun. Buried here, on a hill called Qubbet el-Hawa (Dome of the Wind), are numerous princes, judges, dignitaries and governors. The tombs are cut directly into the stone cliffs and feature hieroglyphics and colorful wall paintings depicting scenes from the lives of the deceased. These tombs don't get a lot of tourist attention; on the day of our visit, we were the only ones there. Just take the public ferry across the river and climb the steps up the hill.

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Aga Khan Mausoleum

Qism Aswan, Aswan Governorate, Egypt

Aga Khan was famous the world over for his extreme, often ostentatiously displayed wealth. Elvis gave Cadillacs to fans; Aga Khan once distributed his own weight in diamonds to some lucky followers. But he wasn't just a rich guy; he was an important spiritual leader, the 48th Imam of the Ismailis, a Shiite Muslim sect. He's buried in Aswan, beside his estate, in this large mausoleum on a west bank hill. The tomb isn't currently open to the public, but the exterior is impressive, as are the views from its perch.

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Monastery of St. Simeon

Aswan Governorate, Egypt

This 7th century Coptic monastery is located in the desert west of Aswan. It's been abandoned for centuries, but is still fairly well-preserved. The lower level (built of stone) remains, while the mud-brick upper floor has disintegrated. To get here you can drive or take a cab to the neighboring new monastery, or rent camels and go through the desert (walking is also possible). We took camels from Aswan's west bank (with help from Nubian guides) and loved it. The first sight of the massive monastery, looming above the vast desolation of the desert is a sight you won't soon forget.

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Kornish Al Nile

Kornish Al Nile, Qism Aswan, Aswan Governorate, Egypt

The Corniche runs along the east bank of the Nile River in Aswan. It's a long road with all sorts of things to do, day or night. There are resorts (Pyramisa Isis), hotels (Horus), banks (Arab African International), pharmacies (Tahrer), fast food (KFC), good food (Panorama), shopping for just about anything you desire, parks, bars, and plenty of boats with captains eager to give you a ride. Commercial and touristy in spots, lovely in others, the Corniche has something for everyone. Nile views and sunsets are stunning.

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Feryal Garden

Corniche, Aswan, Egypt

These gardens are located at the south end of the Nile Corniche, beside the Old Cataract Hotel. The park has paved walkways that run along the east bank of the Nile and up high on a hill for great views of the west bank and Elephantine Island. There are massive boulders throughout the park, benches, overlooks, trees (including local palm varieties) and tall decorative lamps. Young couples like to congregate here to watch the sunset. There is a small entry fee, about 5 LE. Very enjoyable place to take an evening stroll or find some daytime shade.

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Temple of Kalabsha

Aswan Governorate, Egypt

The Temple of Kalabsha doesn't get a lot of visitors, so there's a good chance you'll have it to yourself. It's located on Lake Nasser, where it was moved by a German archaeological team before the building of the Aswan High Dam flooded its original location. The Roman-era temple (30 BC) was dedicated to the Nubian Sun God Mandulis and contains some very nice relief carvings. To access Kalabsha take a car to the motorboat launch near the High Dam and hire a boatman. Motorboat is the only way to get there.

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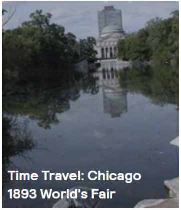

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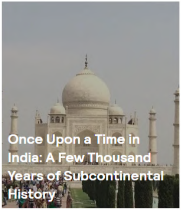

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