

UNFORGETTABLE

# EGYPT

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Egypt is full of impressive sights, including the Sphinx (left), traditional felucca sailboats (top right), and bright tents set up on the street for weddings and celebrations (bottom right).



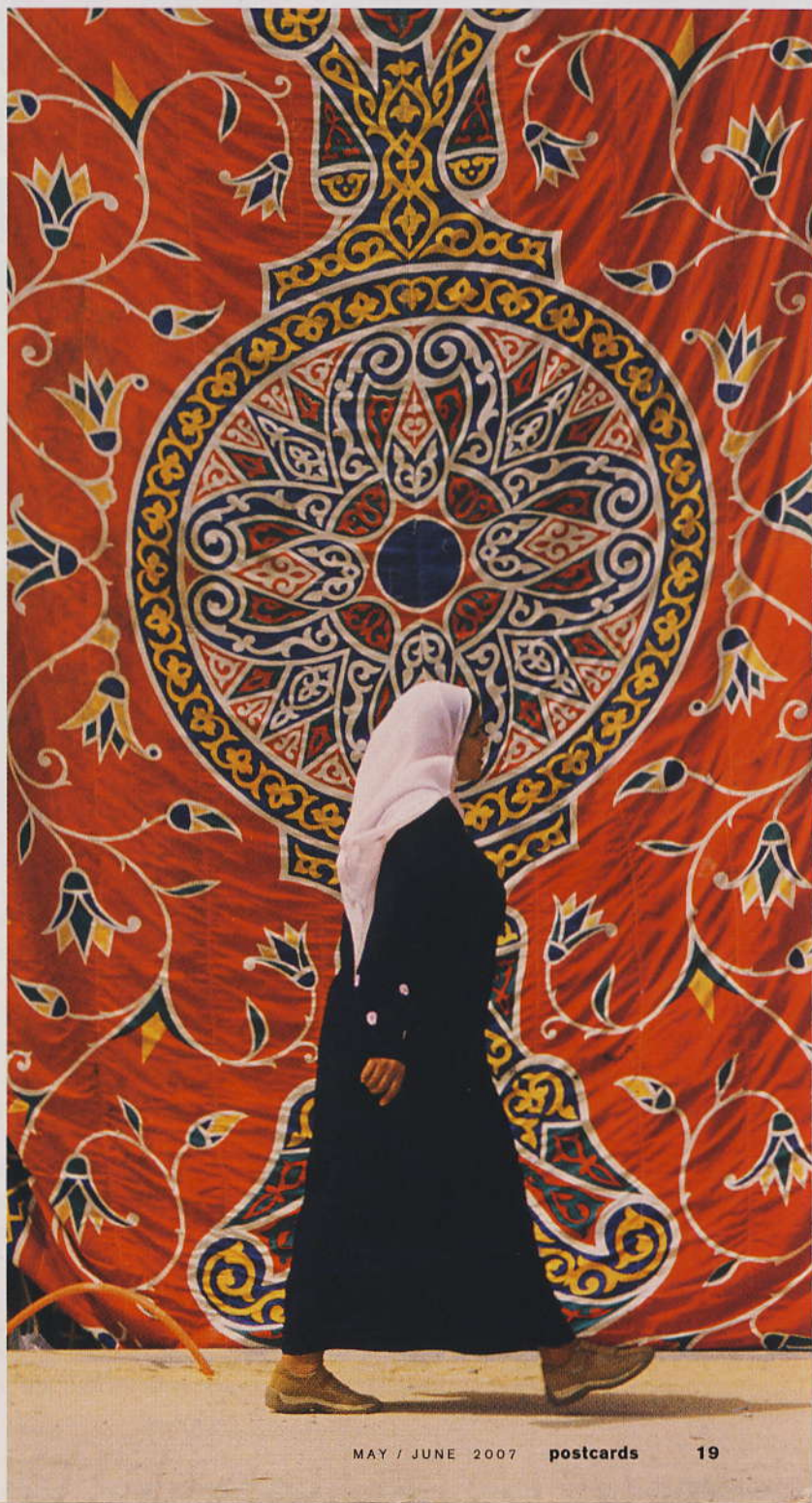
By Ginger Taggart

**Egypt's quintessential travel experiences—from exploring the ancient pyramids to watching the sun rise over Mount Sinai—are the kind that stick with you for a lifetime.**

**T**hroughout years of travel, I have found that the richness of a destination lies in the landmark experiences it offers. These are not your standard, fond vacation memories but rather those rare, unbelievably vivid moments that occur when an experience is so powerful it leaves a lasting, personal imprint.

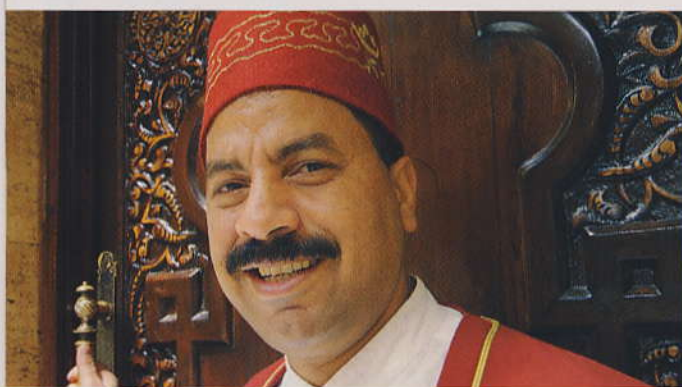
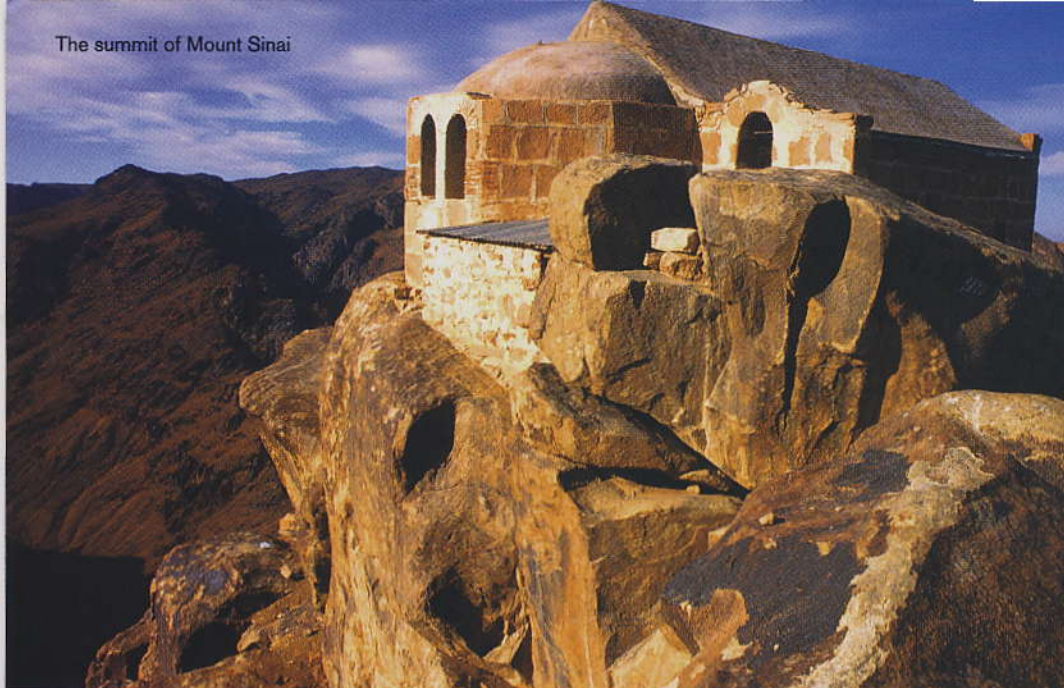
My trip to Egypt in 2006 was filled with such defining moments, echoing the land's ancient history and spiritual significance. The country provides an incredible diversity of experiences: you can visit the only remaining wonder of the ancient world, take a spiritual trek up Mount Sinai, or plunge into cobalt waters to discover some of the world's best diving.

Though there are many sites worth seeing in Egypt—from the legendary Nile River to the historic cities of Luxor and Alexandria—for me, there were four experiences in particular that were simply unforgettable.





The summit of Mount Sinai



# KNOW

## Before You Go

**When to Visit:** Egyptian summers can be unbearably hot, so winter (November through February) is the popular tourist season. It's best to avoid visiting during the month of Ramadan, during which time many shops and restaurants have limited hours, and eating or drinking in public is discouraged. Ramadan begins Sept. 13 this year.

**Security:** All hotels and cars have security checks. If you feel uncomfortable, avoid popular bars, restaurants, and markets but don't discount a visit to this destination. Your Carlson Wagonlit Travel expert can help you find a reputable tour company and top-notch accommodations.

**Wardrobe:** Realize you are a guest in another culture and respect the customs. Outside of hotels, women should wear pants, longer skirts, and blouses covering the shoulders. Men should avoid wearing shorts or tank shirts. Be sure to remove your shoes before entering a mosque.

**Etiquette:** The gesture of placing your right hand over your heart shows humility and gratitude, and it can be used to politely say no. Avoid sitting with the soles of your shoes facing outward or toward another person, as this is considered impolite. When greeting a member of the opposite sex, it's best to avoid hugs or kisses. A handshake will work just fine.

### The Great Pyramid

Having long dreamed of an Egypt vacation, I often envisioned the moment I would stand in awe in the shadow of the pyramids and the Sphinx on the plains of Giza. In reality, these structures surpassed even my greatest expectations.

It is a common misconception that all three pyramids at Giza top the list of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. In reality, it's only the Great Pyramid of Khufu that claims this title. The largest pyramid ever built, it was created for the Pharaoh Khufu around 2560 B.C. to serve as a burial tomb.

Although it sounds too obvious to be a revelation, the most remarkable aspect of the Great Pyramid is its pure size. Quite simply, it dwarfs imagination. I listened in disbelief as my tour guide said that the pyramid, if disassembled, could create an eight-foot wall around all of France. If laid end to end, she said, its more than two million blocks of stone would reach three-quarters of the way around the equator. The precision of the pyramid is nearly as daunting. Inside, the construction is so precise that not even a card can be wedged between the stones lining the walkways.

The enormity of this feat amplified my fascination. Standing there on the plains just 10 miles from the bustling modern metropolis of Cairo, I could feel the history and grandeur of past civilizations.

### The Egyptian Museum

Leaving the pyramids behind and traveling through Cairo past the brown-hued Nile, I arrived next at the Egyptian Museum with its stunning collection of treasures.



Established in 1835, this museum houses more than 120,000 works of art from prehistoric to Greco-Roman times. It showcases an impressive collection of mummies from the 18th to 20th dynasty, as well as ancient statuary, jewelry, and an astounding collection of more than 1,700 treasures from the boy-king Tutankhamun, known as King Tut, whose nearly intact tomb was discovered in 1922.

After relishing the majesty of the pyramids, I hardly expected to be awestruck in a museum. Yet perhaps my most personal, memorable moments in Egypt occurred as I stared into the richness of King Tut's golden mask and coffin. It was as if a bolt of beauty hit me, stunning me speechless. The craftsmanship of the pieces created such a life-like treasure that the boy-king seemed ready to whisper secrets from his ancient past.

The museum houses 89 rooms within two floors, and visitors can get a preview of each room and its artifacts at [egyptianmuseum.gov.eg](http://egyptianmuseum.gov.eg).

### Red Sea Diving

Although scuba diving might not be the first thing that comes to mind when Americans think of Egypt, the Red Sea offers some of the world's most spectacular diving.

With more than 1,000 species of fish and 150 of coral, the Red Sea is the only dive area in the world to command three rankings on the Top Ten Dive Sites listing by Scuba Travel, an online diving guide. Two of these top locations—Shark and Yolanda Reef, and Thistlegorm wreck—can easily be visited on day dive trips from the city of Sharm El Sheikh, while the

third—Big Brother—is best visited from a live-aboard boat from Hurghada.

I started my dive at Shark Reef, which features a 30-foot deep plateau and a drop to blue infinity. From there, currents carry divers to Yolanda Reef, named for a cargo ship that was transporting bathroom fixtures when it sank in 1980, scattering toilets throughout the dive site.

For me, the most memorable aspect of diving in the Red Sea was the colorful contrasts it provided. Leaving miles of arid landscape behind, I plunged into turquoise waters and entered a kingdom where color reigned supreme. Purple and golden corals waved in greeting as brightly colored schools of fish swam by. It was exhilarating.

### Sunrise on Mount Sinai

A few hours from the Red Sea sits Mount Sinai, the site where Moses reportedly received the Ten Commandments—and the site of some of my favorite Egyptian experiences. I thoroughly enjoyed visiting St. Catherine Monastery, which sits at the base of the mountain and is one of the world's greatest centers for religious pilgrimages. Cited as the world's oldest working Christian monastery, it includes a 6th-century chapel built on what is believed to be the site of the Burning Bush. It also has a wonderfully preserved citadel and houses priceless works of art, including a library of ancient manuscripts and icons second only to the Vatican.

However, it was the journey

up Mount Sinai that provided the most defining experience. Shrouded in darkness, I joined thousands of other visitors to trace Moses' path up nearly 4,000 steps to the mountain's peak. The starlit journey took about three hours,



during which time I dodged tourist-laden camels and marveled at the procession of flashlight-created light specks climbing skywards. It was humbling and thought-provoking.

At the summit, the experience reached its literal and figurative peak as I huddled with strangers and marveled at the first rays of sunlight

Trafalgar Tours' "**Best of Egypt**" tour hits the highlights of Egypt, from the ancient pyramids and the Egyptian Museum to a Nile cruise and the Temple of Luxor. The tour visits seven cities in 11 days and includes admission to all the sights, as well as local tour guides, fine dining, transportation, and deluxe hotel accommodations. For more information, contact your Carlson Wagonlit Travel expert.

breaking over the historic setting. The soft-hued sunrise was both an ending and a beginning—the perfect close to my Egyptian travels and the start of memories I would keep with me for years to come. ■

*Ginger Taggart has worked in the travel industry for more than 15 years and visited more than 40 countries on six continents.*