

International Bicycle Travel Fact Sheets
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 Middle East : Part 1 :
Egypt by Bicycle 2004

Resources

- **Lehnert & Landrock** map “*Egypt*” (approx. 1: 950,000; £E20 in Cairo airport) is OK, shows four categories of roads, but the large scale made choosing a micro-route more like a gambling to us. Also the junctions look very different on the map than in the desert, few secondary roads were missing. But good map by Egyptian standards. Main problem is that road signs are in Arabic and the map is in English. But the locals were always helpful. Note that people here are not very “mapwise.” Even for police it takes couple of minutes to locate Cairo on the country map. So consider carefully before following any suggestions.
- **Lonely Planet** “*Egypt*” (2004) contains a short description about how to get around by bicycle, but nothing that is based on experience, though. Nevertheless, you will need a guide book, e.g. **Lonely Planet** , as local tourist information is not oriented towards independent budget travel, especially by bicycle.
- There are tourist offices at the major attractions in Cairo. Main office is 5 Sharia Adly, Downtown, tourist police office is next door.

General remarks

Egypt is a controversial destination for a bike tour. The people outside the tourist areas are friendly, intelligent and very helpful; hospitality gets to new level with Bedouins. However, in the areas that “enjoy” the heaviest effect of package tourism, for example Sharm el-Sheikh, Hurghada, Luxor and in some parts of Cairo (Pyramids, Egyptian Museum, Khan Al-Khalili) the attention you’ll get is not as genuine. The hustle there is constant and may become wearing. Some of them are ready to do and say anything to get some of your money. Theft is not a problem, it’s more a matter of lying and cheating. And they are very good in that.

These notes are intended as an introduction to cycling conditions, which may not be addressed in mainstream sources of information. Prices here are written in £E (Egyptian pound) US\$1 = £E5,80, 1€ = £E7,81, £ 1 = £E11,17 (rates updated 2005.03.13)

Arabic is the official language, but English is widely understood. “Salam alekum” means “Hello” or more like “Peace.”

There few mountainous areas (Southern Sinai and Eastern desert; Mt Katherine 2642m), but vast majority of the land is rather flat. Daily temperatures in December - January are around 15 – 25 C; the Sinai mountains can experience even sub-zero temperatures. In the summer it’s very hot with flies and mosquitoes. Sandstorm “khamisin” happens occasionally in the springtime that can be furious, in the winter it’s usually a northern wind. We had a tailwind all the way, first western from Cairo to Gulf of Aqaba, then northern for the rest of the trip to Safaga.

For females best way to avoid the excess of attention from Egyptian men is to carry a husband:). It’s important to make clear that you’re married, no matter the reality, and you’ll get respect from them. Clothing is not that big issue, but long sleeve pants and shirts are recommended. Riding in “lycra” outfit is not very polite towards the locals. There seems to be a relation between the clothing and amount of kids throwing stones at you.

Traveling restrictions

Independent road traveling is strictly restricted in Egypt. Generally, cycling is allowed in Sinai (not in the Northern parts), on the Red Sea coast, on the Mediterranean coast and in the cities. For example in the Nile valley, Western desert and Eastern desert are out of bounds for independent cyclists. Tourist are forced to travel in convoys secured by the police (with their car or bus), but you can’t keep up with them on your bike. Roadblocks are in every intersection and town, but only on a major roads. You might get past checkpoints on minor roads (Have a look at the “Police and security in Egypt” in my Egyptian links), but it’s not wise to try to mislead the authorities in Egypt; espionage is a delicate matter. Try to avoid photographing on “strategically important” areas e.g. military bases, Suez canal.

So the planning of a trip to Egypt should be begun by sorting out the road you’re are allowed on, instead of looking what would be most interesting, unfortunately.

Roads & Traffic

Road surfaces are generally sealed and in good condition. Despite the strong British influences traffic is right-sided. Shoulder for cyclist outside the cities is generously wide. Locals use bikes a lot. Kids want to race with you, but bikes are mainly used for transportation of goods; we saw some massively loaded bikes in Cairo. There are new mountain bikes (very cheap), but they mainly use old and elegant men’s bikes with various types of accessories. Petrol is cheap, approx. £E1,00 per liter and people tend to use private cars a lot. Road rules doesn’t exist, really. There are donkeys, tractors and trucks driving on a wrong side of the road, traffic lights aren’t obeyed either. Characteristic feature for Egyptian traffic is to drive with any motor vehicle without lights. In the cities and in the country no one uses the headlamps, but only when encountering. They have a small lights in the corners of the car/truck to make it visible, but they rely on streetlights and full moon to light the road. (It was full moon when we were there.) So if riding night time lights in both direction should be used in addition to reflectors. In cities traffic police presence is prominent, and they keep up the order in big intersections.

As there's various types of transportation mixed in traffic drivers are very cautious and polite towards cyclist. Even though the traffic in Cairo has a bad reputation it is manageable by bicycle, too. In the end of our trip we rode from the pyramids through the city to island of Zamalek, and later I did some rides in central Cairo with no problems. But it was in the end of the trip. Leaving the airport in the day one, was a complete shock. You will need time to acclimatize. Dogs rarely chase the cyclists, but are numerous. Locals ride bicycles a lot, but even the generic Shimano spares are non-existing. Standard wheel size is 26", and spares widely available, but only with Woods/Dunlop valves(no Presta or Schrader). New tube for my rear tire (including work) cost £E10 in central Luxor! Egyptian are very good bush mechanics so with steel frame and racks you will have no problems. Taxis and "Jalla Jallas" (small passenger buses) can be used as a emergency transportation & recommended in the cities after dark.

Water

In the winter climate is dry with moderate temperatures and water consumption is not very high. In deserted areas the long distances makes it demanding for the water supply. There's plenty of bottled water available even in the smallest towns. Prices vary from £E1-3 per 1,5 liter of water, which is produced in the Western oases. Water is also available in 5 liter canister, in slightly cheaper price. I was carrying one on my back rack and the container was a tough build. Tap water should not be used.

Food

Egyptian food is a mix of different food cultures of their near-neighbors; e.g. Lebanese, Greek and even English. We were on a vegetarian diet, and got along pretty well. Food is based on rice and beans, both widely grown on plantations in the Nile valley and well supplied all over the country. Closer you are the Nile valley, the better and more fresh products you'll get. In remote towns of Sinai desert there is very few fresh vegetables available, but still always onions and garlic. Again, fruits are great and cheap in bigger towns, but here are none in remote places. Prices vary between the towns, but in touristy Luxor nice, juicy oranges cost around £E2 per kg. There's tamiyya and fuul (beans and something, no meat) sold at the street stall in towns, but we only attended to couple of tourist-oriented restaurants; stomach ache is very common among tourists in Egypt. Even the smallest supermarkets have a nice selection of pastas, rice, Lebanese bread, soft cheese, canned meats and vegetables, chocolate, cookies and peanuts, and sometimes with prices displayed. Bargaining is the way to go in the markets and bazaars in Middle-East, but in supermarkets it not polite to bargain. In a cheap tourist-oriented restaurants mains vary from £E10-30, but you have to be very cautious here; they often serve dishes you haven't ordered to the table and you'll be charged for them as well. Just don't touch the items and check the bill for any extras before paying. To avoid the stomach problems we mainly cooked our dishes ourselves. Petrol is cheap, and the spice markets just amazing. Afford some time in Cairo/Sharm/Luxor/Hurghada to stock your spices, herbs, lentils and everything. They say that the flavor comes from the sun. As Scandinavian I can't deny that one. We didn't try any meat dishes, but chicken, lamb and beef is widely available in restaurants and meat stalls. As an Islamic country alcohol is not widely available. Bigger cities have bottle shops and some bars sell beer to go. Stella beer has been brewed in Egypt since 1897. It's light lager and served cold. 24 hours after your arriving you're allowed to buy alcohol at the tax free shop in the airport. Liter of Finlandia vodka was £E70. Be prepared to pay £E5-7 for 0,5 litre can of beer.

Accommodation

The Red Sea coast is packed with hotels where the road is close to the beach, and you have to be lucky to find your own spot by the sea. But why to bother; there are number of cheap Bedouin camps along the coast costing around £E20 per night dbl with shared facilities, but always with a good beach. Very touristy towns like Hurghada or Sharm el-Sheikh doesn't have camps, but still some reasonably prices hotels. There are no hostels. Egypt is a major package tourist destination for Europeans and hotels are countless. Most of them are resort-like and checking in for one or two nights isn't possible. In the winter air-conditioning is not an issue. Rather pay for running water. Bring a clothes line too : hotels do not provide convenient do-it-yourself laundry facilities, so important to a bicycle traveler. Hotels standards vary greatly; price is no indicator of quality. In particular, many hotels lack maintenance, especially in the bathrooms. Hotels in Egypt are not used to host cyclists, but we found every of them very helpful and reliable in storing our bikes. Most of the hotels do not provide the linen, so it's good to carry your own or a sleeping bag. Nights can be pretty cold in the winter. Camping is allowed in only couple of national parks in Egypt, but in the remote areas there's plenty of space to set up a camp. Ras Mohammed National park in the Southern tip of Sinai was the only "legal" campsite for us.

Services – “*” = “recommended”; H = Hotel; C = Camp

Place	Hotel	Comments (on Town etc)
Cairo	H. Mayfair, in Zamalek £E90	Home of 16 million Egyptians. A madhouse of a city. Mayfair is a clean hotel with walking distance to city center, bit expensive, but with western standards. Cycling in Cairo is the best way “feel” the city's rhythm. Good guides available. Couple of bike shops in Bulaq, north of Sharia 26 th of July.
Dahab	H. (unknown) 500m north of the lighthouse	Ex-hippy town, now very touristy. Good diving, but otherwise rather boring. £E 35 for dbl, shared facilities. Lots of cheap camps around here. ATM's.
Hurghada		Ferry port to Sharm el-Sheiks. Airport. Supermarkets and some cheap hotels, too. Atm's.
Luxor	H. Atlas * £E20	Friendly management, dbl with linen and bathroom. Ancient town of Theba, valley of the Kings, Karnak Temple, Thomas Cook, ATM's. Bike shops on the Abdel Moneim al-Adasi, close to railway station.

Nakhl		Three supermarkets, a bakery, no banking. Petrol station. Kids like bikeracing.
Nuweiba	C: Soft beach * £E20	Laid back tourist town. For meal: Dr. SheshKebab. Supermarket, money ex. No ATM.
Ras Mohammed NP.	Camping US\$5 per person	Beautiful National park in the southern tip of the Sinai peninsula. Amazing corals. No facilities at the campground, but by the sea. Alternative to Sharm el-Sheikh, 15km's west from Sharm.
Sharm el-Sheikh		Hundreds of hotels and restaurants. Busy airport, ferry port for Hurghada. Close to Ras Mohammed National Park. Few reasonably priced supermarkets. Banking.
Safaga		Hotels in the northern end, good markets in south by the bus station. Service at the bus station very "Egyptian." No ATM but few banks.
Suez	H. Sina £E45	Friendly staff, but bad facilities. Private bathroom, but no running water. Offered us free falafel for breakfast.
Thamad		No supermarket, but a small restaurant that stock vegetables, water, cookies and cola.

Please forward any comments or additions to < mjkain(at)utu.fi > Happy cycling !