

Egypt with ease

The Red Sea resort of El Gouna makes for a seamless sunny getaway, writes **Sarah Gillespie**

With a stiff breeze blowing and shallow seas before me, I can see why El Gouna attracts kitesurfers of all levels. I'm trying it for the first time at the Duotone watersports centre inside the Casa Cook hotel – though with the kite only, as it takes a few days to gain the skills needed to hit the water. Omar, my instructor, is a model of patience as he teaches me how to guide the kite from 12 o'clock to 10 o'clock and two o'clock, then back to 12.

This beginner-friendliness is one of the defining characteristics of El Gouna. I encounter it again as I whack the green during my golf lesson at the Steigenberger Golf Resort, sending sods of grass flying. Golf instructor Danny just laughs and squashes them back into the ground with his foot. "Good! That's a good swing!" As an adventurous traveller, my holidays usually entail far less tuition, but El Gouna's gentle approach is winning me over.

RED SEA REDEFINED

Founded in 1989 and operated by Egyptian developer Orascom, El Gouna – set on Egypt's Red Sea coast – is built on 36 interlocking islands. It has just over six miles of beaches adjoining a series of wiggly, man-made lagoons that look a little like the bright blue arms of an octopus from the air.

As a planned city, it benefits from aesthetic harmony since all architecture is in the same modern Nubian style; new building plans must be greenlit by Orascom to ensure they match the approved style and palette.

For first-timers to Egypt, El Gouna makes for an easy introduction. There are security gates at the city entrance, so only residents or hotel guests can enter. A Wi-Fi network covers the entire development and I see no graffiti anywhere. Plus, the moment I arrived, I received a text from a personal concierge who could attend my every whim, pick up laundry or arrange a transfer using the area's ubiquitous tuk-tuks. But ➤

PICTURE: Ghada Amin

DESTINATIONS

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: A 4x4 adventure in the desert; The Chedi El Gouna; Fanadir Marina

PICTURES: Christos Drazos Photography; Ghada Amin

that doesn't mean El Gouna lacks character. Unlike many planned resorts, there's a distinct absence of multinational chains; some of my favourite independent businesses included the Tandoor Indian restaurant (where our six-dish breakfast cost less than £10) and the Daily Dose cafe, both located in the peaceful Abu Tig marina.

ADVENTURES FOR ALL

With 19 resorts to pick from – all but one owned by Orascom – El Gouna has accommodation options for almost every client. We are based at the five-star Steigenberger Golf Resort, but tour several others to get a taste of their selling points. We enjoy breakfast in the boutique minimalism of the adult-only Casa Cook; go paddleboarding at the Cook's Club (mid-range yet chic; pitched at younger guests); and are treated to sushi and head massages at the sumptuous, east Asian-inspired Chedi.

Several resorts operate a Dine Around scheme, where clients can swap a pre-paid meal for one at another hotel or eat out at an independent restaurant in town.

With such an absence of stress, some travellers might feel compelled to get their heart pumping in other ways. This would explain the popularity of sports and activities,

which make up one of El Gouna's main draws. Among other active pursuits, there's snorkelling in Red Sea, along with golf, go-karting, motocross, a plethora of racket sports academies, horse riding and nine Padi dive centres.

DESERT DRIVES

Should it all seem too sanitised, there's always the option to escape to a more authentic side of Egypt with a day trip to Luxor, or on a quad bike into the Wadi Bileh desert.

I try the latter with local operator Alex Safari. Our destination is a Bedouin village shrouded by wind-blown sands, where it last rained in 2016. We sip hot black tea as our Bedouin hosts tell us about their traditionally nomadic lifestyle; for instance, how they use camels to locate underground water reserves and how they dig wells. As we chat, I tear into savoury *shrak* flatbreads still warm from the fire-heated iron plate – a delicious opportunity to experience Arab hospitality.

En route back to El Gouna, we stop at a viewpoint to watch the last rays of the day melt over the dunes. As the sky deepens into indigo night, we putter back to our soft embrace of a town, where the hardest decision is where to eat dinner – and a stay truly felt like a holiday. **TW**

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STEIGENBERGER GOLF RESORT

This family-friendly, five-star resort was fully renovated in 2023. Its 268 rooms all have a balcony or terrace and range from superior rooms sleeping up to three, to four-person suites. Among the nine drinking and dining options are the Izakaya teppanyaki restaurant and lagoon-view rooftop bar Hole 19. A buffet breakfast is served in the massive Fairways Restaurant, with four separate stations covering a world's worth of options. Between the main building and the lagoon, there's a strip of golden sand beach and clients can take a free boat ride to another, quieter beach across the lagoon – where they'll also find the Steigenberger's 18-hole, par-72 championship golf course (pictured). elgouna.com



BOOK IT

Tui offers seven nights at Casa Cook El Gouna on a B&B basis from £1,276 per person, based on two sharing, including 20kg luggage, transfers and flights from Gatwick on July 14. tui.co.uk

EasyJet holidays offers seven nights at the Steigenberger Golf Resort El Gouna on a B&B basis from £1,013, based on two sharing, including 23kg luggage, transfers and flights from Gatwick on July 14. easyjet.com/holidays