

Dive back into Egypt

After a turbulent time, Sharm el-Sheikh is ready to welcome back travellers in search of winter sun, finds **Cathy Toogood**

As soon as my face submerges, there's a flash of fluorescent yellow inches from my nose.

And, as I focus, I realise I'm surrounded by a school of iridescent blue and yellow parrotfish, tails dancing above coral in shades of turquoise, lilac and honey.

I float motionlessly, trying to absorb every detail of this lively underwater world, my gaze following one of the elegant, shimmering beauties, which is straying from its companions towards the sandy sea bed.

I'm snorkelling only metres from the jetty at laid-back resort The Breakers Diving & Surfing Lodge in Soma Bay, and, as we head back from the house reef to dry off, a stingray peeks casually out from below the walkway.

A SHARM LIFE

The Red Sea's technicolour marine life is one of the star attractions of Sharm el-Sheikh. This popular Egyptian resort has had even more of a rollercoaster ride than most, with a terrorist attack on a Russian aircraft giving rise to a four-year travel ban by the Foreign Office, which was lifted late in 2019 only for the pandemic to halt its recovery just a few months later.

Two years on, with Egypt removed from the UK's travel red list in time for the

winter season, there is increased interest in holidays to the country, according to specialist operator Red Sea Holidays.

"We have seen a huge jump in demand for our Egyptian holidays since the UK relaxed its Covid-19 testing requirements for tourists," says Red Sea Holidays' managing director, Andrew Grant. "The combination of guaranteed sunshine, superb hotels and great value really appeals to the UK market. I expect demand to continue to bounce back as we head into the new year."

Parent company The Red Sea Hotels Group has been investing in new luxury hotels over the past couple of years. The all-inclusive, five-star, adult-only Grand Palace in Hurghada opened in June 2019, with its own private beach and outdoor swimming pools.

And a mammoth 485-room resort with architecture inspired by Ancient Egypt is also set to open in luxurious Sahl Hasheesh in 2022, and is set to have one of the biggest swimming pools in the world.

SUN AND SAND

While Egypt's luxury all-inclusive resorts have enough to keep clients entertained for a relaxing week on the coast, the country has many other attractions that

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WHERE TO stay

The Grand Palace, Hurghada

Relaxation is key in this adult-only, all-inclusive five-star. Laze on squishy loungers by the pool or on its private beach during the day and choose from a range of restaurants in the evening. The 319 rooms are spacious, with 76 luxurious swim-up junior suites available, or villas with private pools for the ultimate in luxury.

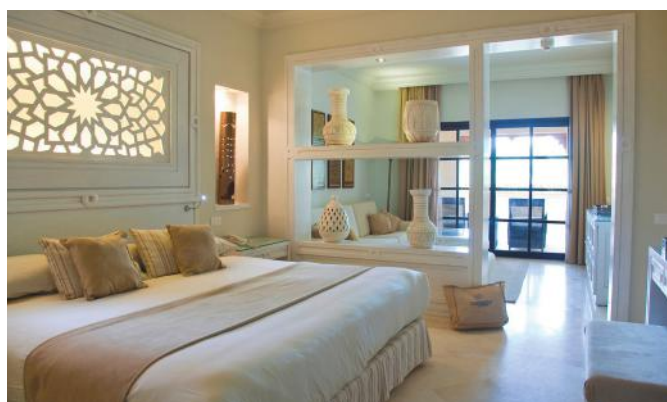
The Makadi Spa Hotel, Makadi Bay

In Makadi Bay, south of Hurghada, this luxurious all-inclusive, adult-only hotel is a place to feel spoiled. Relax in one of its three pools (one of which is an infinity pool), snorkel at its easily accessible reef, or play tennis on its courts. The hotel has an excellent range of dining options, including six à la carte restaurants in the hotel and more in the nearby Makadi Mall.

BOOK IT

Red Sea Holidays offers seven nights at the five-star Grand Hotel Sharm in Sharm el-Sheikh from £589 on an all-inclusive basis in December 2022. The price includes flights from London, all transfers and late check-out.

An all-inclusive 14-night Nile cruise-and-stay package starts at £1,145, including seven nights at The Grand Makadi Hotel, Makadi Bay, and seven nights on board *Grand Rose*, with flights from London, transfers and 10 excursions during the cruise. redseaholidays.co.uk



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Swim-up rooms, The Grand Palace Hurghada; quad biking; Junior Suite at The Makadi Spa Hotel

PICTURES: Graeme Fordham; Shutterstock/Pravosudov Yaroslav



make it stand out as a winter-sun destination.

In contrast to rainbow scenes underwater, more than 90% of Egypt is desert, and a popular way to see this undulating landscape is on a quad-biking safari. While initially nervous, zipping through endless dunes untouched by humans, with sand and wind whipping my hair, was exhilarating.

Our group of bikes snaked through the sand to a Bedouin camp set alongside a mint-green mosque. After tea and flatbreads, we saw the camp's pharmacy, which sells herbal remedies and beaded bracelets, and peeped into its tiny supermarket to admire camel-hair carpets and bags made on a loom.

THE NILE

A twin-centre trip is a great option for clients who'd like to tick off bucket-list attractions and kick back in the sun, ideal for those who are keen to get the most out of their first holiday post-Covid.

We combined a relaxing all-inclusive stay in Hurghada with an action-packed trip to Luxor. Once known as the ancient city of Thebes, the busy city on the Nile is home to a mind-boggling number of treasures from the ancient world.

The Valley of the Kings is a highlight, where pharaohs were buried in underground tombs carved into rocks and painstakingly concealed. "The pharaohs were more interested in tombs than palaces, as the afterlife is longer," our guide, Usama, explained as we marvelled at the sheer enormity of the site and tales of

the treasures that were buried with rulers, including King Tutankhamun's 11 kg solid-gold mask.

A standard entrance ticket let us go into the resting place of Ramesses IV to see wall carvings brought to life in deep ochre, terracotta and royal blue, underneath a ceiling of stars. Entrance to Tutankhamun's tomb costs extra, and enthusiasts can also stop at Carter's House on the way back to Luxor to learn about the British archaeologist who discovered it in 1922.

In a patch of green on the road between the Valley of the Kings and the Temple of Hatshepsut, his house has been set up to look as it did when he lived there – albeit with the addition of a life-sized replica of Tutankhamun's burial chamber.

Another stand-out sight in Luxor is Karnak Temple, one of the largest religious complexes in the world. The evening light show brings many of Egypt's ancient tales to life.

Clients can experience Luxor as part of a Nile cruise. Our hotel, the Hilton Luxor Resort & Spa, on the banks of the Nile, with two outdoor pools and a spa, was an ideal place to relax after a hot day sightseeing.

Lounging on the riverbank next to its pool, I watched the golden sun setting on my final night, its reflection rippling on the Nile, with the silhouette of a felucca boat slicing across it. This ethereal sight is just one unforgettable imprint from a country that's had fewer visitors than it deserves in recent years. "Tourists can find everything in Egypt – history, sun, resorts and coastline," says our guide, Abu. "They are very important to us." **TW**