



Restful red sea

Looking for tranquil winter sun? Try Marsa Alam, suggests Morag Bruce



Angelfish the size of side plates, a clownfish in its anemone home, neon triggerfish squabbling over a patch of coral below a thousand-strong shoal of electric-blue tiddlers.

This colourful scene isn't found on a remote tropical reef following a long boat ride, the preserve of expert divers; it's at the end of a jetty outside one of the biggest hotels in Marsa Alam, southern Egypt.

Provided they heed warnings not to touch the coral, snorkelling guests can watch this underwater

soap opera unfold at the reef's edge, where the turquoise Red Sea plummets to deep blue.

▶ **SELL: SWITCH FROM SHARM**

Even with such a dreamy tale, there's a chance that, at present, the suggestion of Egypt might raise a client's eyebrows. But what's true of Sharm el-Sheikh isn't true of destinations such as Hurghada, Makadi Bay, Marsa Alam, Luxor, Aswan or Abu Simbel, which are not subject to a Foreign & Commonwealth Office

advisory against travel. Tourists can expect to carry on as normal, taking advantage of competitive packages, exploring ancient sites and coral reefs, while basking in sunshine and average winter temperatures of 25C.

Dedicated Sharm fans should head to Hurghada, which has a similar lively atmosphere. For those after a much quieter holiday, then Marsa Alam, 175 miles to the south, has much to recommend it. Intrepid divers used to arrive at this one-time fishing village via a three-hour journey from

Hurghada, escaping crowded waters in other Red Sea resorts.

Since Marsa Alam international airport opened in 2003, tourists can go from baggage carousel to welcome cocktail at their hotel in as little as 15 minutes.

There is currently only one UK return flight a week, with Thomson on a Wednesday, and British visitors are in a minority.

Most guests to Marsa Alam come from Germany and Belgium, but unlike Sharm or Hurghada, it doesn't attract many Russian tourists.



→ There has been significantly less development in Marsa Alam than in other areas. You can drive along much of its 31-mile coastline with only turquoise sea on one side and Mars-like desert on the other. Clients can tread the only footprints on long stretches of golden-sand beaches and dive or snorkel at virgin coral reefs.

As well as the wonders of the natural world, Marsa Alam offers the chance to explore some of Egypt's most iconic ancient sites – Luxor is accessible by road in three-and-a-half hours, for example.

▶ STAY: PEACEFUL & EASY

Hotels are dotted at various points along Marsa Alam's coastline, with numerous half-completed resorts offering a sense of things to come.

Closest to the airport is Port Ghalib City, a gated development of hotels, residences and a marina with shops and restaurants, built in 2007.

The 309-room Palace Port Ghalib Resort sits at its centre, with grand Arabic-style buildings sweeping round a heated pool, overlooking a stretch of private beach and boardwalk jetty over its house coral reef. Children are welcome, but most



Much of Marsa Alam's 31-mile coastline features only turquoise sea on one side and desert on the other

guests are couples, and it has a tranquil mood. Any evening entertainment tends to finish at about 10pm and, save for a few drinks in the Lagoon Bar, most guests head to bed long before midnight.

The hotel's main restaurant, Olive, is a quadruple-height space with sparkling chandeliers and opulent decoration. An international breakfast and dinner buffet is served, with tables on the terrace and inside – desert evenings can be chilly. A buffet lunch is served in the hotel's Lagoon restaurant, while snacks are available at the pool and beach bars. Guests can book bed and breakfast or half-board, and there's a range of restaurants within a five-minute walk at the Port Ghalib marina.

Rooms are elegant and spacious, with hints of traditional



vibrant textiles. Standard rooms have a garden view, with sea or marina views costing more. Free late checkout is a bonus – guests needn't check out until after 4pm to catch the 6.40pm flight to Gatwick.

The Arabian-styled all-inclusive Siva Port Ghalib Resort neighbours the Palace, connected by an immense man-made saltwater lagoon; guests of each hotel can use facilities in either. Siva has 345 rooms and suites, and is geared towards families. There is a kids' club, all-day entertainment and two swimming pools, as well as the lagoon, a lazy river and

water slides. As at the Palace, meals are buffet style with the same international and themed offering. Siva also offers a more romantic candlelit experience in Cardamom – an à la carte Mediterranean restaurant next to Siva's private beach.

A short drive down the coast and you reach the all-inclusive Fayrouz Plaza Beach Resort, owned by Belgian company The Three Corners Hotels & Resorts. Its high repeat business rate is represented by countless trees in the grounds, each with a plaque showing a name and room number – when a guest has been six times, a tree



ABOVE: Hilton Marsa Alam Nubian Resort

LEFT: Siva Port Ghalib Resort

RIGHT: Luxor





If clients have never been diving, there are underwater options for all levels of confidence and experience

Hilton's enviable location overlooks Abu Dabab Bay, one of Marsa Alam's most beautiful beaches and close to many of its best dive sites. Its coastal waters with seagrass meadows attract scores of grazing giant sea turtles and the rare dugong (sea cow).

SEE: ANCIENT & MARINE

Marsa Alam is a diver's paradise and all hotels will be able to advise guests on appropriate excursions - many have on-site dive centres. If clients have never been diving, there are underwater options for all levels of confidence and experience.

One not to be missed is a day-long boat trip to Sataya, a horseshoe reef about eight miles off the coast (from £59 through Red Sea Holidays). Depending on the season and wind direction, the 90-minute sail might be

choppy, but the crew will offer anti-sickness tablets. This slick of coral is the daytime hangout of a 200-strong pod of spinner dolphins. Getting up close to wild dolphins is a truly special experience, made possible by the small number of boats going to the reef, in contrast with trips further north. Guests can also enjoy the beauty of the deep from the comfort of a glass-bottomed boat, departing Port Ghalib marina.

Adrenaline junkies will also enjoy quad-bike or 4x4 safaris, from £29, through the other-worldly desert landscape. Those who prefer a slower pace can take a camel ride.

Another advantage of Marsa Alam is the easy access to Luxor's ancient sites including the Valley of the Kings and Karnak, which is offered by Red Sea Holidays as a one-day or overnight trip, from £99 or £163. If they choose the latter, guests have the chance to book a balloon ride at sunset as well as a light show at the monuments after dark. Aswan and Abu Simbel are also offered as day (from £99) or overnight trips (from £163) from Marsa Alam. Just south of Marsa Alam, guests can visit Wadi el Gamal (Valley of the Camels), a national park with an ancient emerald mine, supposedly where Cleopatra sourced her gems. **TW**

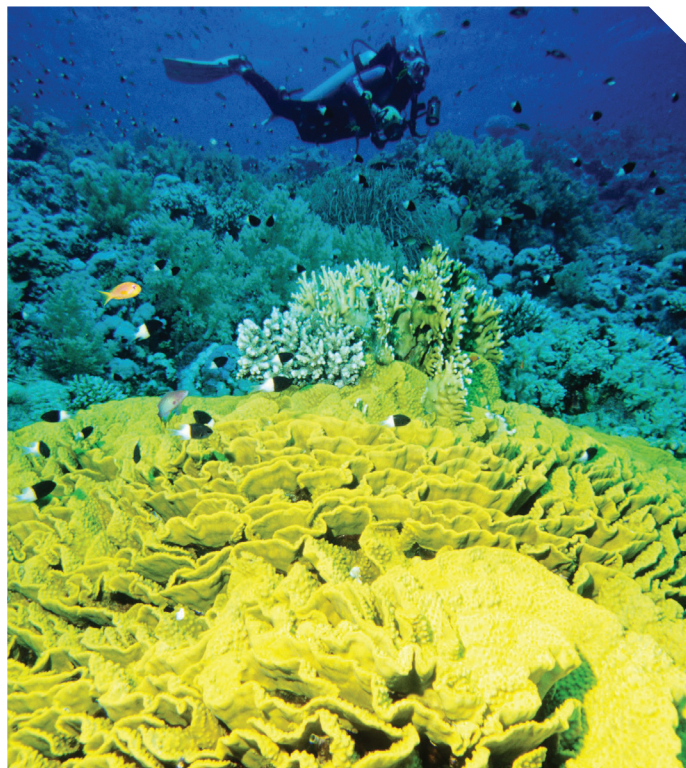
is planted in their honour. They'll be given the same room each time, with every preference prepared in advance. The hotel's general manager personally greets every guest. This kind of familiar service isn't for everyone, but it does feel genuine here.

Its 471 comfortable rooms and suites have subtle Arabian influences. As well as the international buffet restaurant, there are two à la carte venues and five bars. The hotel features three swimming pools, two of which are heated in winter.

The Fayrouz Plazas' stretch of beach features separate areas for activities including volleyball and yoga, and a large jetty takes guests over the coral for snorkelling. There are also smaller cove beaches within a five-minute walk that are purely for relaxing, dotted with sun loungers and beach bars. Guests can walk along the beach to Port Ghalib's shops and restaurants in about 20 minutes.

A little further down the coast, the 400-room Hilton Marsa Alam Nubian Resort is a peaceful escape. Its dramatic domed lobby features a cool low-slung seating area, referencing the design and architecture associated with Nubia, the ancient kingdom that once straddled southern Egypt and northern Sudan. The complex has four pools, two restaurants and seven bars.

Unlike the Palace, Siva and Fayrouz Plaza, the Hilton isn't directly on the beach, as this section of the coast is protected from development. The



Red Sea Holidays offers seven nights' half-board at the Palace Port Ghalib Resort from £809. The operator also offers seven nights' all-inclusive at Siva Port Ghalib Resort from £688, at Fayrouz Plaza Beach Resort from £717 and at Hilton Marsa Alam Nubian Resort from £858. All prices include return flights from Gatwick to Marsa Alam with Thomson, luggage and transfers, and are based on a March 2 departure. redseaholidays.co.uk