

The River Nile houses many an Egyptian treasure on its banks.

DIVE DEEP INTO EGYPT

A family cruises through Egypt's many cultural and historic riches. But the kids want fun. Luckily, the Red Sea has answers. **BY RATHINA SANKARI**

“HOW MANY TEMPLES MORE? When do we start for Hurghada?” questioned my 10-year-old daughter and 15-year-old son. We were on a family trip in Egypt and had taken the popular culture trail: Cairo, followed by a cruise from Luxor to Aswan. While the idea of a Nile cruise was interesting—it meant soaking in the jacuzzi for hours, digging into sumptuous meals, and waking up late every day—in reality, most of our time was spent exploring the towns of Luxor, Edfu, and Aswan, and visiting the various Egyptian temples.



But culture wasn't something that interested my kids; history wasn't their cup of tea. That was my area, and I was always on the lookout for places with a rich past. Choosing Egypt as our destination for the winter school break was my selfish decision—to take in the rich ancient civilisation and its fascinating pharaonic history. I sold the idea to my kids with the image of a luxurious cruise on the River Nile.

While the Mayfair cruise was indeed a plush experience, the kids didn't find enough time to enjoy its amenities. During the day, we would be out exploring the towns, listening to the stories of Egypt's pantheon of gods and its pharaohs, and visiting ruins of grand temples. Meanwhile, the kids would languish on the sidelines, indifferent to the surroundings, waiting for the guide to finish his afterlife theories.

While my son loves the story of Horus, the Egyptian god with a falcon head, after watching the movie *Gods of Egypt*, he wanted real adventure on this trip. The only thing my kids enjoyed were the physical challenges of exploration. At Giza, they climbed through the narrow, claustrophobic confines of the belly of the Giant Pyramid without breaking a sweat, while I crawled on my fours and came out panting. They had a good laugh.

I had decided to include a visit to Hurghada in the itinerary as an afterthought. It was for the children.



▲ An emperor angelfish feeds on soft coral in the Red Sea.

◀ The Karnak Temple Complex in Luxor doubles as an open-air museum.



ROBERTHARDING/ALAMY

FROM TOP: NATURE PICTURE LIBRARY/ALAMY; TANATAT PONGPHIBOOL, THAILAND/GETTYIMAGES



▲ Hurghada is a popular scuba diving destination.

Statues inside a 4,400-year-old tomb of an Egyptian high priest, at Saqqara in Giza.

I had to keep them happy if I wanted them to join me on family trips in the future. The beach resort town hugging the Red Sea is the perfect destination for those seeking the sun, sea, and sand. It enjoys sunshine through the year and attracts visitors who seek both thrill and leisure. For the intrepid, it has a host of activities. With rich marine life, corals, and shipwrecks, it's the perfect place for diving and snorkelling.

For my younger one, this town in the Red Sea governorate was the main attraction of the trip, as she wanted to try her hand at diving. From wondering if she was even eligible for scuba diving at her age, to looking up the minutiae of underwater survival, she was fully invested two months before our departure date. After three nights and four

days, we disembarked from the Nile cruise one last time and took the train for a five-hour-long journey from Aswan to Qena, a city in Upper Egypt. Our travel agent had arranged a car to drive us from Qena to Hurghada. On the drive, the scenery changed from rural life to rugged wilderness with large swathes of desert devoid of vegetation, punctuated with volcanic-rock mountains that were formed three million years ago. Often, the desert would conjure a shimmering illusion of water at a distance, but as we neared, it would vanish. This was the first time the kids got to experience a mirage. They were awestruck!

Hurghada is unlike all the other inland towns of Egypt. It receives Europeans through the year; many of them return for its warm weather and all-inclusive resorts. I had made bookings for us in The Three Corners Sunny Beach Resort (threecorners.com), which boasted of a water park, private pebbled beach, and numerous restaurants. As the kids hit the water park, I lay down on a sunbed with a book in hand. After a week-long trip, I just wanted to put my feet up and relax with a drink. But my husband and kids were in Hurghada for their dose of Egyptian adventure.

I have never been a water creature. While I learnt swimming in the sixth grade, I never enjoyed being in the water. Once, on a family vacation to the Konkan coast in Maharashtra, I had made a feeble attempt at exploring the Arabian Sea's underwater world. But the moment I would go below the surface, I would panic and immediately surface. I couldn't get past the fear. So, while the rest of the family enrolled themselves for a diving session in Hurghada, I decided to watch from the sidelines.

The dive site was in El Dahar district. A few steps from the beach, the ocean bed dropped steeply to reveal a reef teeming with marine life, making it the perfect spot for snorkelling, introduction dives, and even night dives. On D-day, after enjoying a lavish breakfast at the



CLOCKWISE: JUERGEN RITTERBACH/ALAMY; ROBERTHARDING/ALAMY; COURTESY OF RATHINA SANKARI

From left: Stone carvings inside Hathor Temple in the Dendera Temple complex, Qena; the Temple of Horus in Edfu.



resort, I accompanied a jittery 10-year-old, an anxious teenager, and a calm adult to the dive site. After wet suit fittings and a crash course in the hand gestures used for underwater communication, it was time to go in.

All strapped up with a variety of gear, including weight belts, buoyancy control devices, dive masks, and cylinders, the kids had to first master underwater breathing in the cold waters of the Red Sea. This was the litmus test I had failed a decade ago. I stood on the pier and watched the scene unfold. Many tourists were busy snorkelling in the clear water. A professional French diver disappeared into the depths. My daughter struggled to breathe with all the gear. The Egyptian diving instructor tried to teach her in his broken English, but she soon started crying. While my son had mastered the art

GETTING THERE

Egypt Air (egyptair.com) flies five times a week from Mumbai to Cairo. Domestic flights fly daily from Cairo to Luxor, Aswan, and Hurghada. You can also take the train from Cairo to Luxor and Aswan. Alternatively, you can travel by road in Egypt. Book your trip through reputed travel agents like **GAT Tours** (gattours.com).

CRUISE

Mayfair (mayfaircruises.com) operates three cruises on the River Nile—Mayfair, Esplanade, and Mayflower. Rates start from ₹28,000 for a single cabin per night with sightseeing. Mayfair doesn't operate during the summer season. They are operational from September to May.

DIVING

There are many diving operators in Hurghada. **Dive More** (divemoregroup.com) conducts many diving programmes starting from ₹5,000.

and was warming up for his first dive, my teary daughter called out, "I'm coming back. I don't want to dive."

We convinced her to give it some time. A few minutes later, the little girl was sending out a happy stream of bubbles to the surface. Soon, she seemed to be swallowed by the sea, followed by my husband. After 20 minutes, which felt like ages on the surface to me, my kids came out of the water. "It is so peaceful, unlike our world," said my reticent son. But his sister had a lot to say, "I saw so many colourful corals and fish! Some were laying eggs!" she exclaimed. The French diver couldn't help himself either, "I have dived in Mexico, but this place stands apart. The reefs here are beautiful. I spotted the puffer fish!"

After a short break, they went in again. She came out screaming this time, "Guess what? I spotted an octopus. I saw it change colour!" Her instructor added that it was rare to see that behaviour. "I also spotted the rainbow fish, emperor angelfish, and the Red Sea clownfish," my daughter boasted. Diving had unveiled a whole new world to my family. My son's instructor had suggested we enrol him for a professional course as he had shown a natural flair for it. On our way back, the little one asked, "When will we go for our next dive?"

Hurghada was a success story. But it had thrown a new challenge at us: finding the next dive spot. Who knows, that could even be my first? +



The writer's kids learn underwater breathing in El Dahar district.

FROM TOP: WESTENDBL/GETTYIMAGES; DPA PICTURE ALLIANCE/ALAMY