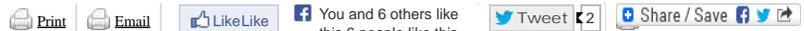




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Lime light: Jewels of the Red Sea

Lubna Abdel-Aziz



They came to winter in Egypt. For hundreds of years since Herodotus gazed at this land, they followed. The elite, the affluent, the intellectuals came to bask in the desert sun, ride camels, visit the pyramids and moon over the lazy river.

Egyptomania broke out with the discovery of the tomb of King Tutankhamon, in 1922. The luster of the solid gold mask of the young king, amidst other priceless treasures caused such a delirium around the world, and a craze for anything Egyptian.

They came to view the gold only to discover other treasures, the greatest historic legacy bequeathed to mankind.

They came to thaw out, from black, cloudy skies and winter snow storms, to embrace and be embraced by the warmth of the blazing sun, once worshipped by the ancients.

There were other destinations for their summers. Lured by the waters of the Mediterranean they headed for, the French Riviera, the Italian Riviera or the Greek Islands.

One magic day, he came our way. French explorer Jacques Cousteau landed on a Red Sea shore, with his diving expedition. Once again the world went topsy-turvy.

The Red Sea, what a revelation!

A sea as old as history, it contained incredible treasures of marine life, unrivaled by any other body of water on the planet.

And they came in droves, not for the monuments, not for the camels, but to worship the sun-god "Ra" as did the ancients... and then there was the sea. Sun and sea pleasure-seekers came to the world's northernmost tropical sea to soak in, and to partake of, the endless gifts it offered.

The Red Sea is in reality a great crack in solid rock that simply filled with water — a seawater inlet of the Indian Ocean which separates Asia from Africa. The habitat of over 1,200 species of fish, 10 per cent of which are found nowhere else in the world. It has become the best known secret tourist-spot, whispered everywhere and for good reason.

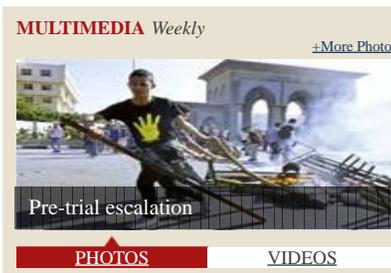
A bit of paradise has sprouted by the Red Sea shore.

Why would any sea, with milky white foam and crystal blue waters, be referred to as "red"?

When you gaze at the crimson hue of the surrounding hills, the miles of coral reef, the bittersweet seaweed and carmine atolls, the russet algae and reeds, the great reddish streaks blown by the desert clouds, and those bright orange rays of the blazing midday sun reflected on the water during the noon hour, you will hear yourself cry: "Why, the Red Sea is really red!"

The Red Sea surface is roughly 438,000km, and borders six countries; Saudi Arabia and Yemen on the eastern shore, and Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea and Djibouti on the western shore. More than 26 resort towns have been developed along the Egyptian shore, a treasure trove for vacationers.

Among the most famous are Ain Al-Sokhna, Marsa Alam, Souma Bay, Safaga, El-Gouna and Sharm El-Sheikh, now a hit holiday destination among the rich and famous. So many summits were held there during Hosni Mubarak's presidency, there is hardly a world leader who is unfamiliar with what they lovingly call "Sharm". Hurghada has also achieved much renown, and has become a blooming city offering everything the heart desires. El-Gouna houses a high number of international luxury hotels, as they all do. It boasts 100 restaurants and is unique, quaint and friendly. Entertainment of every kind is available at El-Gouna and even the Metropolitan Opera drops in every now and then. No wonder they now call this the Red Sea


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If you wish for serenity, tranquility, privacy and peace; if you really want to get away from it all without sacrificing any of life's luxuries, head for 'Sahl Hasheesh', (Green Valley). Without a doubt, one of the most picturesque vistas the earth has to offer, it is a dream spot for sun lovers and... lovers! Only 18km from Hurghada, it is the largest single area occupying a prime beach-front bay, spanning over 12km of virgin sea-water, pristine beaches and marvelous coral reefs.

Every single sea sport is available and diving experts are on hand to assist you.

Luxury hotels, a dozen of them, line up the beach-front, all different in style, aura and atmosphere. The architecture is stunning, in a variety of themes from, Pharaonic, Greco-Roman, Arabic, Chinese to ultra-chic and ultra-modern. It is less than a five hour flight from London, Paris, Rome, Berlin, Moscow, West Africa and South Africa.

You can do anything you desire there after sunset, but if you choose, you can do nothing.

The best thing is just to gaze at the surface of the silent sea, listen to muffled laughter or lovers' whispers, dream of 40-some centuries of Red Sea history, of Hatshepsut, of Moses. Not a sound will disturb your reverie, but the myriad palm trees may be listening.

With 75 per cent occupancy, it is clear that sun-worshippers have paid little heed to fear-mongers, crying foul. Let them continue with their warnings of violence and terrorism.

It was far safer and pleasurable to be at Sahl Hasheesh last Friday than at the Los Angeles International Airport. Lounging in paradise, we felt sorry for all those travellers in search of a holiday under the sun.

Perhaps they can still make it here for the World Cup playoffs.

Now, would that not be heaven on earth?

“Water has the power of washing away our sense of responsibility, and those who on land resemble the oak in their firmness behave like floating seaweed when on the sea.”

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)

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