

# Sharm El Sheikh: Water Wonderland

Diving is just the beginning in this underwater paradise



Lush, tropical looking plants sway from side to side, with an array of pink, orange, red, yellow and white sponge-like vegetation in every shape and size scattered between the stalks. A green and blue glow is cast all around, dappled with streaks of light and clouds of darkness. It's absolutely beautiful, this canvas of living shapes painted in a rainbow spectrum. Just a few steps in any direction and the temperature changes; pockets of heat and cold envelop you in a surprisingly quick tempo. An eerie silence is all around, like a cloak of stillness and calm, only interrupted by the occasional high-pitched hum that shortly fades away again. Something slimy brushes past you but you're not afraid and in a mere moment it's gone. No, you haven't stumbled onto the set of *Avatar* - you're just deep in the beautiful underwater world hidden in Egypt's Red Sea, in the waters of Sharm El Sheikh.

Famous worldwide for its spectacular diving, it would come as no great surprise if

visitors to Sharm El Sheikh are more familiar with its coral reefs than the land itself. The warm waters make it an ideal place to go diving, and its reefs are some of the most stunning in the world. A large number of the species of marine life that exists in the Red Sea can't be found anywhere else and the variety of captivating creatures is staggering.

A popular aquarium catch due to their colourful stripes, the bannerfish is common in the area. You must be careful though, some species with built-in defense mechanisms may take you by surprise. The lion fish's long poisonous spines are disguised by its beautiful print, while the pufferfish looks innocent enough until provoked, when it quickly inflates into a large spiked ball. Keep your eyes peeled for the stone fish, an expert in camouflage that normally coozies down on the sea bed; its spines can release some of the most venomous poison in the sea. Reef sharks and even the curiously shaped hammerhead shark also roam the waters here, as do barracudas, the blue spotted

ray and the manta ray. Angelfish, clownfish (just like *Nemo*), hawkfish, parrot fish, scorpion fish, trigger fish and squirrel fish are just a few of the thousands of species that can be spotted in the waters around Sharm El Sheikh. The marine diversity is simply astounding.

If you're not a seasoned diver, don't worry - many of the hotels and dive centres in the area offer training courses and the ability to obtain your PADI Diver Certification within days. For those who prefer to stay a little closer to the surface, there are also fantastic snorkelling opportunities in the area, allowing you to join in all the underwater fun without the need for all that complicated equipment and pesky training.

Strict environmental laws and conservation efforts keep this precious natural paradise in top condition, but that doesn't mean you can't enjoy fresh seafood catch. Fishing trips can be easily organised and range from smaller excursions in Naama Bay to trawling out towards the Straits of Tiran. Guides will



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be more than happy to help you cook and serve your prey once you've caught it; usually prepared according to Egyptian traditions.

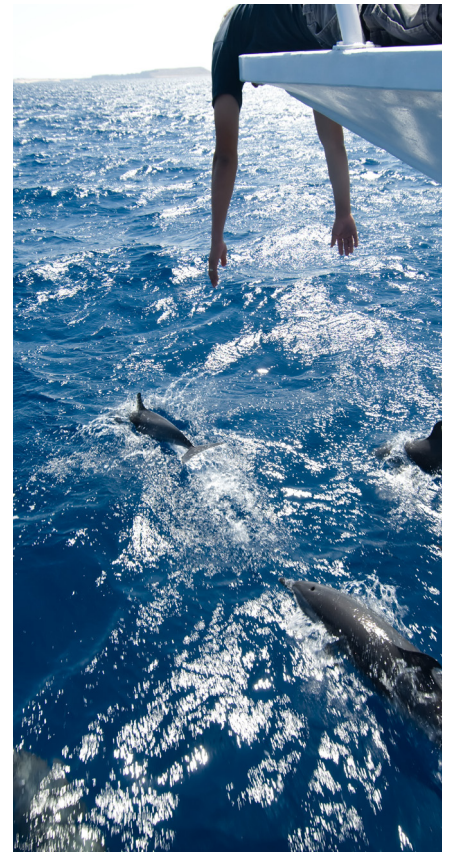
With its seemingly endless sandy beaches and vast blue waters, it's no wonder that Sharm El Sheikh is considered bliss for water sports enthusiasts. Parasailing, windsurfing, water-skiing, jet-skiing and catamaran sailing will set your pulse racing, while banana boats and glass-bottom boats provide ample additional entertainment. If you still have some energy left, beach volleyball is a great way to work up an appetite for a delicious meal at one of the many restaurants along the beachfront; otherwise, just give in and flop onto the golden sands to soak up some rays.

Sharm's treasures aren't all housed underwater, however, and there are plenty of places to visit above ground when you're starting to get sea legs. The Wadi of Mandar, one of the largest wadis in the area, is a short jaunt away and a camel ride around it is guaranteed to be an unforgettable experience. A day-trip to the famous Mount Sinai is another must-do. The adjacent Mount Catherine is the tallest peak on the Sinai Peninsula and the

highest mountain in Egypt while its namesake monastery, St. Catherine's Monastery (located at the mouth of a gorge in the mountain's foothills), is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

If you're in the mood for a little rest and relaxation, don't fret - it's not all adrenalin-packed excitement. The breathtaking natural beauty of this seaside resort provides the perfect backdrop for some luxurious pampering. Housed in an abundance of high end hotels in the area, there is a plethora of world-class spas to choose from. While a majority of them offer much-loved East Asian therapies such as Thai massages and Balinese body wraps, we suggest you try something with a little flavour from the region. An Egyptian coffee scrub or Red Sea salt scrub will leave your skin as smooth as can be, while Arabic and Egyptian-style massages will soothe away all your aches. You can even try some beauty treatments that have stood the test of time, such as one of the milk baths so prized by the legendary Cleopatra. Known for her soft and radiant skin, her authentic ancient treatments, implemented by the experienced staff at Sharm's swanky spas, will leave you positively glowing.

The fun doesn't stop after dark though; Naama Bay buzzes with life at night, populated by both tourists and the local population. Chill out at one of the numerous beach bars, where live music or DJs spinning lounge tunes help you mellow out under the stars. Sports fans will be more than satisfied with the many spots that show games on the big screen and won't have to miss a single match while they're in town. With bowling, ice rinks, cinemas, karaoke



and beach parties among the vast selection of evening entertainment options, there is never a dull moment. Of course, if you want to just kick back and take it easy there's more than enough ways to do that too - this is a beach town after all.

No holiday would feel complete without a souvenir or two and we recommend picking up some gold and pearl jewellery, local handicrafts, perfumes and cotton goods while you're here; haggling will delight in the market stalls and bazaars of Sharm El Sheikh. Between the traditional markets and modern shopping centres, visitors can find everything from shawls and sports gear to food, local art and crafts and designer clothes.

Once a simple fishing village, the city has transformed itself into one of the most popular holiday hotspots in the world and it's easy to see why. With its gorgeous climate, breathtaking scenery, luxurious pampering treatments and seemingly endless list of exciting things to do, Sharm El Sheikh has it all. ■



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