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Egypt's bygone glamour gets a luxurious new spin

In a land with an ancient civilisation comes a new offering for travellers seeking luxury with an authentic patina.



La Maison Bleue.

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U *m-El-Dunya*, they call it in Arabic; Mother of the World. Jerusalem impresses, Rome dazzles, but in no other place on Earth do the ancient and the vibrantly contemporary coexist as compellingly as they do in Egypt.

Two thousand years before the Mycenaeans began forging bronze weapons in Greece, Egypt's fabulously wealthy culture was at its apex, engineering huge cities, exporting religious pantheons and innovating surgical techniques. In greater Cairo alone (which today has a population of 22 million), the built environment spans 5000 years, from the step pyramid at Saqqara in the west – the oldest completed stone building known to humans – to the medieval citadel of Salah El-Din in the east, and old Coptic Cairo to the south, with its 1700-year-old Byzantine churches.

Then there's its modern history: the 16th-century Islamic tombs of the Necropolis, the grand late-19th century boulevards of Khedival (aka Downtown) Cairo; like Haussmann's Paris vision, re-writ large, in sand and saffron hues.



Distinctive architecture and antiques set the scene at Luxor's Hotel Al Moudira, on the west bank of the Nile.

The country has long been bucket-list fodder; a Nile cruise or a Sphinx viewing at dawn. Surprisingly, that's as true as ever; Egypt's allure has proven remarkably impervious to the regional unease created by wars in Gaza and Lebanon.

Over the past year, there have been anecdotal accounts of travellers, usually Americans, cancelling holidays; and Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and its British equivalent both advise a high degree of caution throughout the country (and against any travel to the Sinai Peninsula or within 20 miles of the Libyan border). Yet despite all of this, 2024 looks set to be a record-breaking year for Egyptian tourism, with just over 7 million visitors by mid-year.

Among a certain worldly cohort, Egypt is not only resilient, but trending. David Prior, the Australian-born, New York-based travel designer, has a bespoke Luxor and Nile cruise itinerary in the offing for February, in

collaboration with Martina Mondadori, editor of sumptuous *Cabana* magazine.

J.J. Martin of La DoubleJ, the American-born, Milan-based fashion designer and part-time wellness guru, recently wrapped up the third of her sought-after women's retreats to Egypt. Visits to the Valleys of the Kings and Queens and Temple of Ramses are woven through with yoga, breathwork and midnight visits to sacred sites, where rituals performed thousands of years ago are recreated.



Views of the pyramids from the Grand Egyptian Museum, Cairo. **Getty Images**

“I think it’s resonating because people are really seeking meaning in all areas of their lives,” she says of the country. “We’re gravitating to the places, practices and people that enable us to do it, especially in travel. Egypt will meet you wherever you are. If you just want beauty, you’ll get it with the incredible museums, temples and ancient art [<https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/travel/why-egypt-is-on-an-antiquities-discovery-spree-20230824-p5dz2d>]. And if you want something deeper, there are some of the most powerful sacred sites on Earth.”

In Cairo, the much-anticipated main galleries at GEM, the Grand Egyptian Museum, finally opened in October. The sheer number of monumental masterworks, almost any one of which would be a show-stealer at another major world museum, is a heady experience. The museum itself is a

triumph of volumes and exposures, with all sightlines subtly leading to framed views of the Giza pyramid complex, just over a mile away.

In Luxor, Orient-Express and Belmond are both rumoured to be interested in flagging the beautiful old Winter Palace Hotel, and planning eventual Nile cruise boat launches. A Four Seasons is slated to open on the river's East Bank in late 2026.



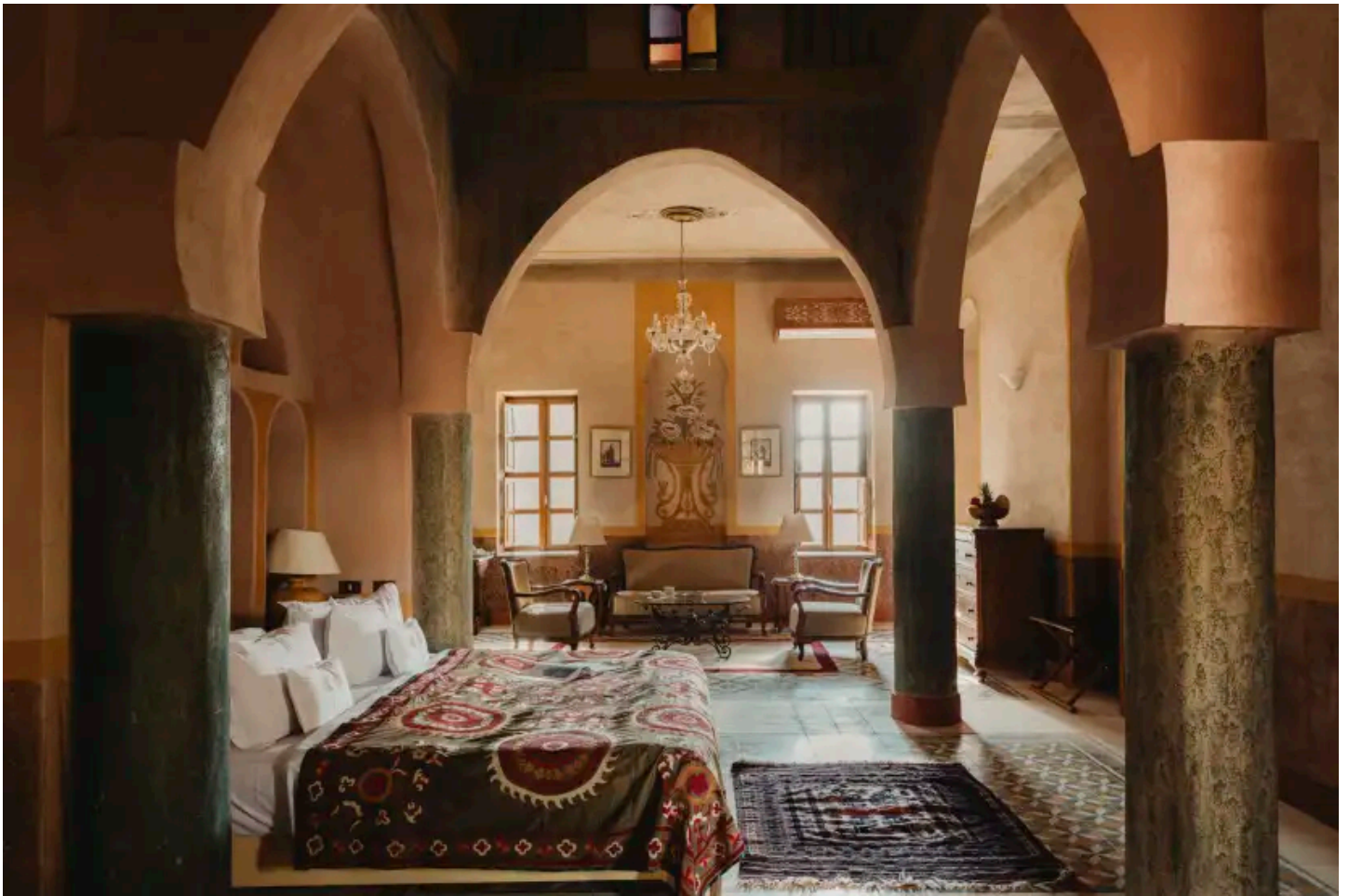
Cruising the Nile on Set Nefru.

And it's Luxor that is the cradle of a new offering that is pushing the boundary on travelling in Egypt. It centres on the Hotel Al Moudira, which opened in 2002. With its huge Levantine-inflected suites, acres of palm groves and gardens, fleet of vintage Mercs and one of the most atmospheric hotel bars in North Africa [<https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/travel/why-magical-morocco-is-a-photographer-s-dream-20200203-p53xa6>], the Moudira has been Luxor's sexy, unassailably elegant incumbent for two decades.

In 2022, it was acquired by Cairo-based lawyer Florian Amereller, who'd stayed a few years earlier and was struck by the hotel's confident, unique style. "I thought this could have been a luxury hotel at the time when the most exclusive tourism in the world was happening in Egypt," he recalls. "It felt like such a special place."

Since his acquisition, Moudira has undergone a thoughtful expansion, hewing true to its throwback 1920s spirit. There are new private villas and a new restaurant. A large organic farm and several artisanal workshops – papermakers, ceramicists, a tailor who whips up *galabeyas* and shirts – now occupy an adjacent swathe of land added last year.

The hotel partners with a five-cabin *dahabeya* called Set Nefru, for cruises to Aswan that stop at ancient temple sites. Once owned by the Egyptian royal family, then by French historian Michel Foucault, Set Nefru is nearly 100 years old. From its shiplap walls to the antique campaign chairs and Fayoum pottery it's furnished with, the boat is the real, unadulterated Nile-cruise deal.



A luxury suite at Al Moudira.

Having lived in Egypt since the '80s, Amereller is well aware the country still harbours original, genuine Egyptian experiences, but notes they're hard enough to unearth even for an old hand, let alone for a visitor. "There is still little in the market that caters to a luxury traveller looking for authenticity and properties with patina," he says, citing a handful of hotels abroad that strike him as evincing those qualities: Casa d'Anna in Naples; Riad Mena in Marrakech; the Shila in Athens; Glenburn Penthouse in Kolkata.

Particularly in Cairo, where most travellers herd into the conglomerate-branded hotels that crowd the Nile's banks, the dearth of hostelries with authentic bones and some iteration of an Egyptian soul frustrates him. "There are beautiful parts of Tunis, Algiers, Beirut, even Casablanca; but there is no urban, grand, colonial area anywhere in the Middle East that can compete with Downtown Cairo for richness and diversity," he says.

Under its layers of grit, Downtown mirrors the economic status of Egypt until the 1952 revolution: wealthy, cosmopolitan, a wintertime bastion of

European aristocracy and high society. It was home to luxury hotels, restaurants, tailors, jewellers – all of which added to the allure of the city, and all of which gradually deserted it during Gamal Abdel Nasser’s rule.

But over the past decade, there’s been a bit of a Downtown renaissance. Rehabilitated buildings hold new office or coworking spaces; a few old theatres and banks gleam from the attentions of artisan restorers. Enterprising young Cairenes are beginning to leave the leafy enclaves of Zamalek island and Heliopolis to take advantage of Downtown’s appealing property rates.

A few years ago, Amereller began acquiring apartments in the Immobilia Building, on Sherif Basha Street. Built in the late 1930s, and often called “Cairo’s first skyscraper”, Immobilia was home to wealthy bourgeois and A-List celebrities, among them Omar Sharif and singer Leila Mourad.



A terrace at Immobilia in Cairo.

Like much of Downtown, the building was showing its age; but the apartments all retained their original herringbone floors, classical

cornices, ornate ironwork and French doors. Amereller has filled them with period furniture and rugs from his own extensive personal collection, installed magazine cover-worthy kitchens, and commandeered the former majordomo of the US Embassy to act as a butler.

Last September, the apartments came online as luxury holiday accommodation. “The guests Immobilia will inspire, I think, are the ones who enjoy a kind of high-low [experience],” Amereller says. By that he means that the area, and also the building’s downstairs lobby, are not for everyone; the latter gives slight *Blade Runner* vibes. “But they are beautiful apartments, with amazing details, created in a very personal way. And that mix is the real Cairo.”

It was on the heels of Al Moudira’s and Immobilia’s success that the idea for Egypt Beyond came about. It’s a network, or alliance, that brings together hotels, lodges, boats and private properties across the country, “all with the *fil rouge* that they all have soul”, says Amereller. “Each is totally different from the other, but has been created in a very personal way; each has a real spirit and sense of place.”



The pool at Al Moudira.

Besides Moudira, Set Nefru and Immobilia, the collective includes La Maison Bleue in El Gouna, on the Red Sea, and Adrère Amellal in the Siwa Oasis. Two months ago, a second Nile cruiser, called Yalla, was added; larger and grander in tone than Set Nefru, its interiors were created by Tarek Shamma, the Cairo-born rising design star who's renovating the Luxor home of Christian Louboutin.

“I wanted it to be a platform for connecting these different places and the experiences; a kind of Silk Road of Egypt, if you will,” says Amereller. The team – which includes Philomena Schurer Merckoll, who as the owner of Riad Mena in Marrakech is no stranger to gorgeous small hotels – then plans itineraries and special cultural experiences.

“Ultimately, Egypt Beyond is giving visitors access to a certain taste level in the country,” Schurer Merckoll says, “from the places you stay to the shops and lesser-known museums and experiences on offer. It's for the traveller for whom luxury is in the range – the best street shawarma, a dinner in the

most incredible private home, and the layers of experience that together it all brings.”

La Maison Bleue, a 13-room hotel owned by billionaire entrepreneur Samih Sawiris, was originally designed for him as a family guesthouse by the Franco-Egyptian architect Olivier Sednaoui (who also designed Al Moudira). Whereas most resorts here seem to channel either Dubai or Ibiza, La Maison Bleue is more Cap d’Antibes via Alexandria – tall, patrician, painted a pale blue and surrounded by landscaping designed by Louis Benech.

Its interiors are a fantastical mix of Ottoman, late Victorian and Belle Époque furniture and designs. Fresh off a recent restoration, with a new Relais & Châteaux designation (and ultra-competent new Parisian management installed), it’s now the most interesting luxury proposition on this coast. Egypt Beyond guests can end a dusty, ambitious historical odyssey with a few days of alfresco yoga, massages and hammams, and excursions to the outer islands’ empty beaches on one of the Maison’s vintage motor yachts.



Adrère Amellal eco-lodge.

Adrère Amellal is an extraordinary hotel that's widely recognised as the Middle East's first genuine eco-lodge. Like Al Moudira, it has been a destination in its own right for two decades. A *sui generis* restoration project in one of North Africa's most historically rich desert oases, it's the creation of environmentalist and architectural preservation specialist Mounir Neamatalla.

Situated on a narrow palm-dotted strip of sandy land between Siwa's hulking salt mountain and its pale blue lagoon, Adrère Amellal has no air-conditioning, no electricity.

The furnishings are simple; textiles woven locally, beds and tables of rough-hewn palm wood. But each night, its rooms are filled with hundreds of candles and guests dine on exquisite food by lantern light (each evening, the venue changes – sometimes a secret gully between huge boulders, others a whitewashed courtyard with fires crackling in braziers).

Neamatalla recently inaugurated a permanent installation of photographs by Lee Miller, in a purpose-built gallery on the property; shot in Egypt between 1935-1939, including in Siwa, they're a fascinating window onto its history.

At an hour's private charter flight from Cairo, or seven hours (at least) by road, Adrère Amellal is a real voyage to get to, notes Amereller. "But it's pure magic when you arrive. Mounir had this amazing vision of using centuries-old building techniques to create from scratch a place that allows its guests to live in harmony with nature and history."

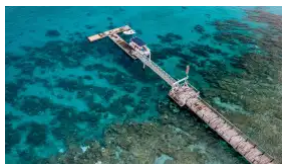
It's far from a universal idea of luxury; but Amereller and Schurer Merckoll note that among its diehard repeat-guest fans are a few sovereigns of European royal families.

Next up for the collective? The restoration of a large villa in Fayoum, the beating heart of Egypt’s ancient pottery-making traditions. Two hours’ drive from Cairo, it’s a well-known weekend escape for Cairenes, but largely off the international radar. Expect to see the area rocket to the top of the tastemakers’ must-see list soon, though. Perhaps “Egypt Above and Beyond” is a more apt name for this clever, long-overdue endeavour. In my 25 years of travelling the world to mine its exceptional experiences, this one looks set to genuinely stand out.

[egyptbeyond.com](https://www.egyptbeyond.com/) [https://www.egyptbeyond.com/]

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