

Red Sea Xanadu

Nick Bateman samples Egypt's most luxurious resort experience

Egypt's blue seas and amazing antiquities have been attracting visitors for 5,000 years, and the boisterous mass of humanity which greets you at the airport immediately takes you back in time.

Yet head for the beach resorts and it's a quieter world. Just 22km north of the airport is the unique Red Sea resort of El Gouna. The massive place is a collection of 14 hotel resorts, everything from extravagant resorts to private villages and boutique guest houses, built over 20 islands.

There, the Sheraton Miramar Resort, designed by British architect Michael Graves, has been described by Architectural Digest magazine as 'a veritable tourist Xanadu'. Built over nine islands the Miramar offers luxury at

three-star prices, surrounded by lagoons and gardens all linked by boat and by walkways.

The Steigenberger Golf Resort, rather more formal than the Sheraton, and also designed by Graves, is home to El Gouna's 18-hole golf course, delightful for an early-morning round.

By day there are 10km of beaches to wander and to laze on, but there's a lot more here than that. The Red Sea is one of the great scuba diving destinations with a number of the world's top dive sites. The heated pools and calm reefs are the perfect place for the beginning diver before moving on to highly-acclaimed reefs and wrecks. The resort's various dive centres offer a complete range of diving education, including PADI diving certification, from beginner to professional level. The Dive Tribe, a 5-

star development centre, is also a certified National Geographic Diving Centre. There are plenty of other water-based opportunities, from waterskiing to deep sea fishing.

Back on land, I can heartily recommend the quad-bike ride up to the mountains for one of the most spectacular sunsets you'll find anywhere.

Nighttime, and things come alive with local musicians and belly dancers. When it comes to eating there's the Dine Around programme, which lets you try the many different restaurants in El Gouna no matter where you are staying for, at most, a small supplement to your hotel bill.

Longwood Holidays (www.longwoodholidays.co.uk) offers 7 nights at the Sheraton Miramar, BB inc flights, from £395. Other info: www.elgouna.com, www.divetribe.com ■

The Sheraton



World's top 10 scuba spots

- ◆ Elphinstone Reef – Red Sea
- ◆ The Pinnacles – Mozambique
- ◆ Wreck of SS Thistlegorm – Red Sea
- ◆ Big Brother Island – Red Sea
- ◆ Sting Ray City – Grand Cayman
- ◆ Similan Islands – Thailand
- ◆ Blue Hole – Dahab, Red Sea
- ◆ Cozumel – Mexico
- ◆ Pixie Pinnacle – Great Barrier Reef
- ◆ Lions Head – Maldives

Compiled by Blueotwo.com

Interactive maps and images of Red Sea sites available at www.blueotwo.com