



A mushroom rock formation in the White Desert.

(Provided by Haitham Salama)

# Egypt's White Desert, a natural museum of chalk rock sculptures

Haitham Salama

Cairo

The White Desert, a dramatic gleaming chalk landscape in western Egypt, is rightly deemed one of the country's astounding natural wonders.

The secluded area, about 500km from Cairo, offers unmatched and inspiring natural sanctuary far from the noise and pollution of urban centres.

The White Desert stretches over 300 sq.km west of the Farafra Oasis between the Nile Delta Valley and the Libyan border. Arriving there is like stepping onto a different planet, one where serenity is a major feature and contact with nature is unhindered by any of modern life's features.

"When you are in the desert, you are entirely disconnected from everything that shatters the quiet of our life today," said Wael Fawzi, an Egyptian university graduate who visited the desert recently. "The place is so rich that you rarely think of anything other than the beauty that unfolds in front of your eyes."

In contrast to yellow-sand deserts that overwhelm with emptiness and desolation, the White Desert offers a surreal landscape.

Millions of years ago the desert was a seabed. Layers of sedimentary rock were exposed when the ocean retreated and a plateau broke down. Some stones formations resisted time's changes, giving the White Desert its distinct features and charm.

Limestone figures are seen dotting the chalk-white landscape in

any part of the desert. The mushroom-shaped formations are 3-4.5 metres tall. Wind and sand over thousands of years fashioned beautiful forms – domes, minarets, castles, rabbits and turtles – that mark the White Desert.

"These are natural sculptures that greet visitors wherever they go in the desert and show that the work of nature is always more perfect than that of man," said Ahmed Salama, an official at the Egyptian Ministry of the Environment in charge of conservation. "We are keen to keep the desert as it is for future generations."

The White Desert was declared a Natural Protectorate by the Egyptian government in 2002, which banned human activities in or near the desert.

A trip to the White Desert is not only about the chalk-white landscape or the alien shapes of rocks and the beautifully coloured boulders. It is also about the unforgettable times visitors can spend in the desert.

There are approximately 20 hotels near the desert, suiting all tastes and budgets.

Many visitors, however, prefer to camp in the desert. It is a unique experience that makes them an integral part of nature in a place totally safe, with a suitable weather almost year-round.

Visitors can hire nomadic people and local Bedouins, who earn a living by cooking, setting up tents and selling drinks.

The White Desert is best viewed at sunrise or sunset, in the light of a full moon, which gives the landscape an eerie Arctic appearance.

"Sleeping under the starlit sky of the desert is quite an experience. One can observe the changing faces of the rocks, which take different shapes and colours, as the sun sinks into the dusk," Fawzi said

The White Desert boasts several natural hot springs, including salt-water springs that offer a healing swimming experience. The area has ancient tombs, carvings and caves left by the Roman civilisation.

Tour operators organise trips to the White Desert from Cairo and other main Egyptian cities at affordable rates. The package to the desert includes safari tours, food, drink and camping accommodation.

It cost Fawzi, who is a resident of Cairo, \$100 to spend three days and two nights in the desert, a trip that he described as "unforgettable."

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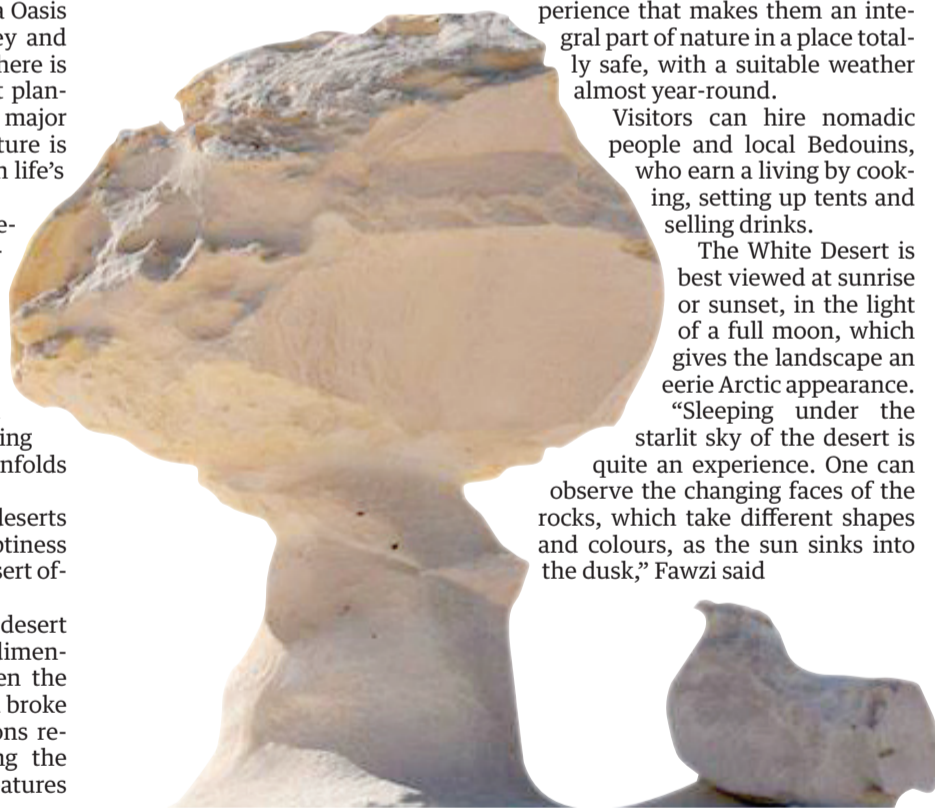
"You do not visit a place like this every day," he said. "Such a trip is what adventurers and nature lovers search for."

Salama said approximately 70,000 foreign tourists visit the White Desert every year, in addition to more than 200,000 residents.

Visitors are usually accompanied by guides, such as Ahmed Abdo, who are familiar with the desert. Abdo, in his mid-30s, said he has been guiding tourists through the different parts of the desert since he was a child.

"I never met anybody who came here and did not want to relive the experience," he said. "This is one of the most important sites for safaris in Egypt and those who love safaris, adventure and nature will regret not coming here."

Haitham Salama is an Egyptian reporter.



An unusual rock formation in the White Desert.

(Provided by Haitham Salama)



A view at Egypt's White Desert.

(Provided by Haitham Salama)



A view of some rocks at the White Desert. (Provided by Haitham Salama)



## Agenda

**Beirut:**  
Through December 28

Events associated with Sursock Museum Late Nights occur noon-9pm each Thursday at the Sursock Museum. The events include exhibitions, collection displays, late-night talks, performances and screenings.

**Dubai:**  
Through December 31

"La Perle" features 65 artists performing amazing stunts and aerial antics above an on-stage pool filled with 2.7 million litres of water in a state-of-the-art, custom-built theatre. The show takes place at Al Habtoor City.

**Algiers:**  
December 1-8

The eighth Algiers International Film Festival takes place in El Mouggar Theatre and the Cinematheque of Algiers. Documentaries and fiction films are scheduled in an event that brings together independent movie producers from all over the world.

**Egypt:**  
December 1-31

The Sphinx Festival explores and promotes the cultural arts of Egypt. It includes music, dance and poetry performances, ethnic costumes, workshops and Egyptian dance classes. The festival takes place at various venues, including the ancient Abusir Sun Temple, Cairo and the Egyptian oasis.

**Amman:**  
December 5-10

Organised by Ma3mal 612 Think Factory, the Karama Human Rights Film Festival includes screening of films, discussions and debates with some of the films' production teams, seminars, workshops and MusiKarama, which entails music concerts and dance performances.

**Abu Dhabi:**  
December 5-23

The Abu Dhabi Food Festival is a celebration of international cuisine. With events across Abu Dhabi, Al Ain and Al Dhafra, the flavour-filled event features many activities and concepts, such as street feasts, fine dining experiences and cooking demonstrations by some of the world's most celebrated chefs.

**Dubai:**  
December 6-13

The Dubai International Film Festival is a celebration of Arab and international cinema. In its 14th edition, the festival will showcase more than 120 films from Hollywood, Bollywood and elsewhere. A parallel programme will include seminars, debates and meetings.

**Tunis:**  
December 8-16

Carthage Theatre Days is an annual festival that features plays from the Maghreb, Africa, the Middle East and Europe. In its 19th edition, the festival takes place in Tunis and elsewhere in Tunisia.

We welcome submissions of calendar items related to cultural events of interest to travellers in the Middle East and North Africa.

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editor@theArabweekly.com