

# FOOD

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# TRAVEL

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# dune roamin'

**There's a riddle in the sands of Egypt's Western Desert – a new hotel that stays cool even in the heat of summer. To unravel it you need to go there. By Siona Jenkins**

Photographer **Jason Lowe**





## The stone pool is all you could wish for after 10 hours in an overheating Jeep

'Go to Siwa in summer? You're mad.' Such was the consensus of friends in Cairo when I announced I was off to Siwa Oasis, deep in Egypt's Western Desert. They had a point. Not only is it surrounded by one of the most arid regions on earth, where the summer temperature creeps up into the high 40s, but, more worryingly, the new eco-lodge where I was to stay – Adrère Amellal – had no electricity. No electricity means no fans, and no air-conditioning...

'It's amazing how the Siwan way of building keeps you cool in summer,' Mounir Neamatalla, the owner, assured me over the telephone. I was sceptical. I have a mud-brick house in Luxor, on the edge of the desert in the shadow of the Valley of the Queens, so I know a thing or two about traditional North African architecture and heat. Its domes, arches and strategically placed windows are, supposedly, the product of centuries of fine-tuning to accommodate the extremes of the desert environment. My house's thick adobe walls, though, manage to absorb the day's heat and radiate it at night, and temperatures inside can edge up to 40°C. Not being one to suffer needlessly, I lined up an air-conditioned room in Siwa in case things got really bad.

Linked to the outside world by only two roads, Siwa is an 82km-long depression with two lakes, more than 1,000 natural springs and acres of lush palm groves. In antiquity, it was famous for the Oracle of Amun, one of the seven great oracles of the ancient world. Such was its power that in 525BC the Persian ruler, Cambyses, reputedly sent an army of 50,000 men to destroy it. Halfway there they were swallowed up in a sandstorm, confirming the deity's awesome reputation. Two hundred years later it was still strong enough for Alexander the Great to trek through the desert for a personal consultation. He was well rewarded: the Oracle's priest pronounced him a god.

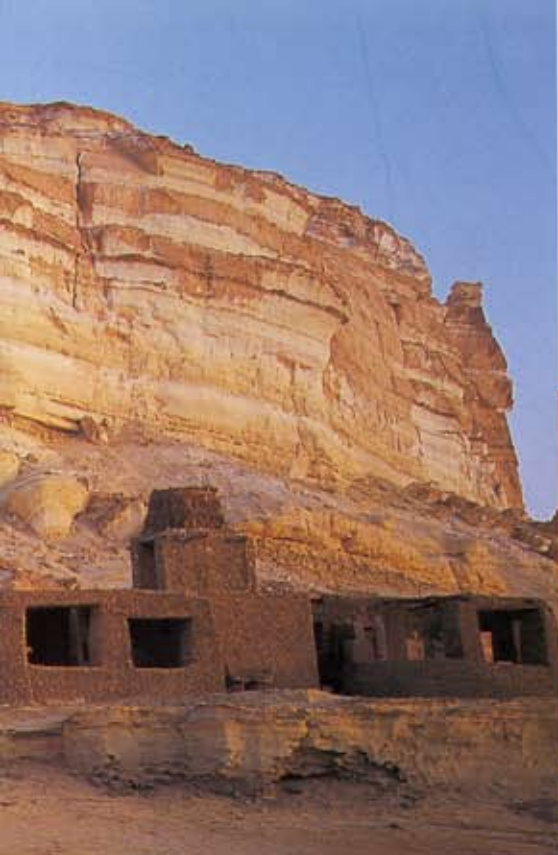
The Oracle eventually lost its power – although part of its temple complex remains to this day – and the oasis fell into obscurity. Only nominally part of Egypt until the late 19th century, its inhabitants developed a reputation for fierce independence, with their own legal system and Berber-based language. They made a living trading dates with the passing caravans and their town was Shali, a labyrinthine fortress on a hill. For centuries, it protected them from hostile raiders or troublesome officials until 1926, when torrential rain began to dissolve the chunks of rock salt and clay, known as *kershef*, used in its walls.



But while the old town is slowly disappearing, *kershef* and its mysterious cooling properties are enjoying a revival at Adrère Amellal. No one really knows why it stays as cool as it does, but the Siwans believe that salt repels bad spirits, so maybe heat can be considered evil in this climate. Some 27 rooms and suites, plus a kitchen and several eating areas, the eco-lodge is barely visible at the foot of the flat-topped White Mountain (Adrère Amellal means 'white mountain' in Siwi), overlooking the Siwa lake and surrounded by the dunes of the Great Sand Sea, burial place of Cambyses' army. Here, too, is a stunning stone swimming-pool, built around a slow-bubbling Roman spring, which is all you could wish for after 10 hours in an overheating Jeep.

'We decided not to have electricity here,' Mounir explains, 'partly to save energy and partly because I wanted to create a real contrast with urban life. I feel that outside cities, man has to have humility. The beauty is already here. Whatever we do will detract from it.'

This sensibility, combined with a healthy appreciation for luxury, is the key to Adrère Amellal. A chemical engineer by training, —————>>



This page, top: Adrère Amellal's dining room, with an organic beetroot salad (top right) prepared by Atef the chef (below, in his open terrace kitchen). The swimming pool is built around an old Roman spring. Left: Adrère Amellal, sheltering at the foot of the White Mountain, and its organic garden



### While you are here

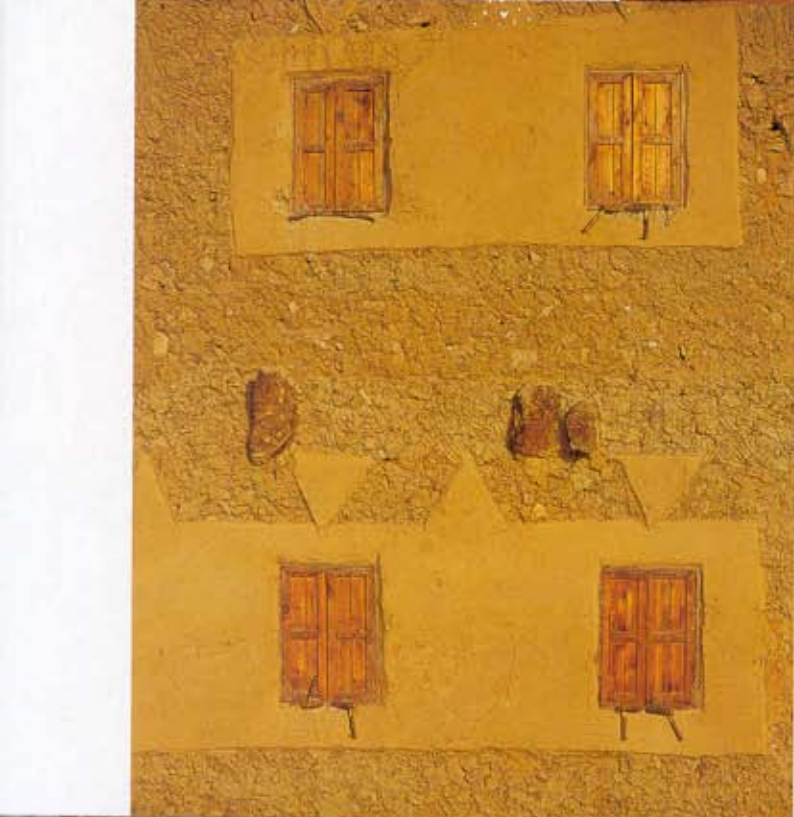
The route to Siwa takes you out of Cairo along the desert road to Alexandria and then turns off towards El Alamein, on the Mediterranean coast. For the most part the road passes through desert dotted with nondescript concrete buildings or scrub, but there are a few sites worth seeing en route:

**El Alamein** This is the spot where Rommel and Montgomery slugged it out for control of North Africa in World War Two, at the cost of an estimated 10,000 lives. Small museum and memorials.

**Marsa Matrouh** Little seaside town surrounded by Butlins-style resorts for

holidaying Cairenes, but with a history stretching back to Alexander the Great. Seven kilometres west is Cleopatra's Bath, where the queen reportedly brought Mark Anthony for trysts among the startling white sands. Named after a rock formation with two openings – one facing land and the other out to sea – they let in water to make a natural pool, presumably a perfect haven for frolicking lovers in antiquity.

**Qara Oasis** Lying some 200km off the Siwa-Marsa Matrouh road, Qara Oasis is more than a detour, and the most isolated village in the Western Desert. Home to 300 Berbers who, like the Siwans at Shali, built their fortress-like town on top of a mountain.



## Most food is cooked in traditional

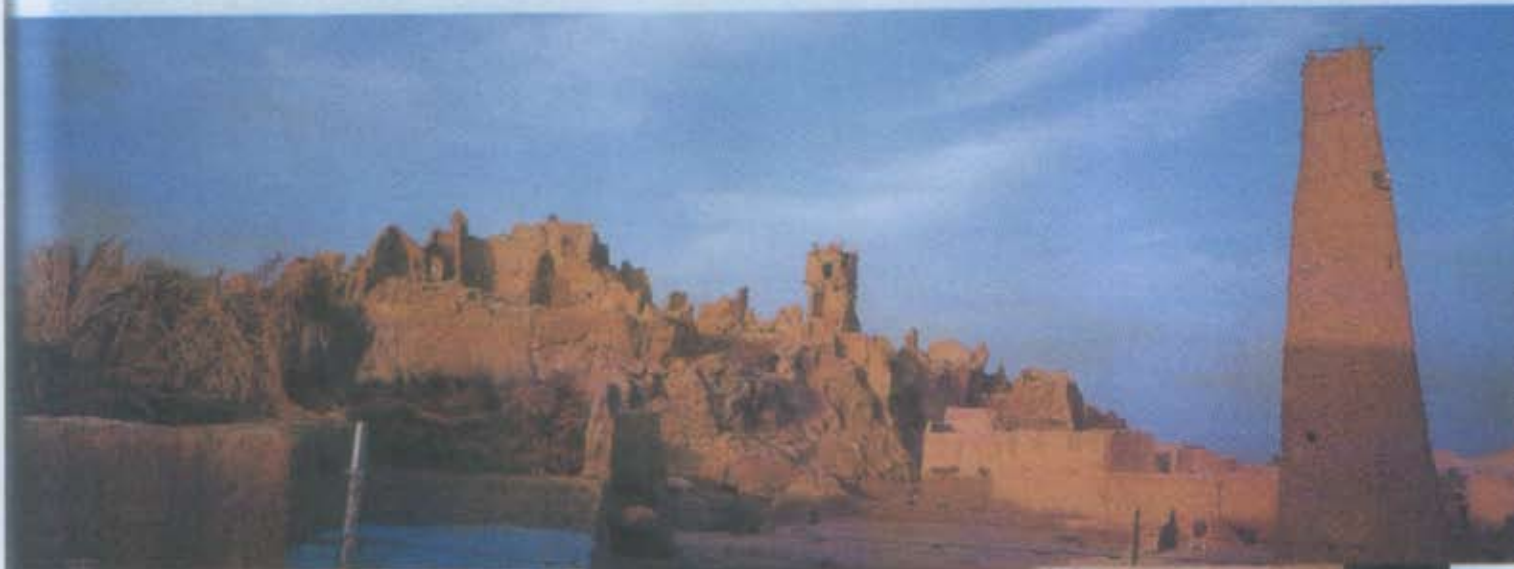
committed environmentalist by profession and consummate host by nature, Mounir puts paid to the idea that an eco-lodge has to mean bland food, spartan accommodation and dodgy plumbing. 'The day I hired the first labourer was the day I hired the cook,' he says. He chose well. Atef, the chef, understands the importance of quality fresh ingredients and uses only organically grown produce from Adrère Amella's own garden. Almost all the food is cooked in traditional clay pots – no mean feat when you're producing the perfect soufflé – and combines Egyptian and Western cuisine with whatever is in season.

Mounir embarked on the project five years ago, when he was director of a development consulting firm in Cairo. He decided it was time to implement his company's philosophy of promoting economic development while respecting cultural heritage and the environment. The lodge's infrastructure conforms to environmentally correct principles (all sewage, for example, is filtered naturally through specially constructed gravel 'wetlands', planted with papyrus, bamboo and reeds), while Mounir's enthusiasm for Siwan culture has breathed new life into traditions that otherwise might have been slowly lost to Cairo's jingoistic nationalism and the low cost of cement.

This last aspect is most obvious in the rustic minimalism of the rooms and suites, with their wooden ceilings, shuttered windows and palm-reed beds. Deep-red Bedouin rugs cover the floors, while clothes are hung, Siwan style, on pegs or lengths of reed suspended from the ceiling by rope. Each room is provided with a little cotton pouch filled with herbs, traditionally used to repel snakes and scorpions (although the screened inner doors keep out all intruders). One or two of the buildings were once houses used during the date harvest; the remainder have been shaped by their Siwan builders, who built windows set low so that you can lie on your bed and see small, snapshot views of the scenery outside. They also inserted chunks of pure white salt into the plaster. Only when I woke, refreshed, on the second morning of my stay, did it occur to me that Mounir was right: I wasn't hot. □



clay pots – no mean feat when you're producing the perfect soufflé



This page, above: Siwan views – the ruins of the old city, built of kershef, and one of the town's two oasis lakes. Opposite: the rustic minimalism of the eco-lodge interior



### Travel information

For information on climate and currency, see Guidelines. Pre-fix all telephone numbers with the international dialling code for Egypt: 00-20.

### RESOURCES

**Egyptian State Tourist Office** Egyptian House, 170 Piccadilly, London W1 (0171-493 5283) offers information to visitors to all parts of Egypt. For brochures, call 0891-600299 (premium rates apply). In Siwa, the domed tourist office can be found just off the town's central square and is run by Mahdi Hweid, a conscientious Siwan who goes out of his way to be helpful. Open daily, 8am-2pm, except Fridays.

**Notes** Visitors to Egypt need a visa, which can be obtained from the Egyptian Consulate, 2 Lowndes Street, London SW1 (0891-887777; premium rates apply), or at the airport upon arrival. There are no banks in Siwa, but the two phone offices both have international lines (rare in remote parts of Egypt).

### GETTING THERE

**Flights** EgyptAir (0171-437 6309) offers return autumn flights from London to Cairo from £282. With British Airways (0345-222111), prices start from £379. **Specialist holiday companies** Ancient World Tours (07071-222950) is one of the few UK companies which goes to Siwa. A tailor-made two-week trip, with six nights in Siwa at Adrère Amellai, costs from £1,000 to £1,400. Soliman Travel (0181-563 9119) specialises in flights to Egypt and offers return tickets for between £250 and £350, plus four-wheel drive vehicles with driver for about £90 per day, including petrol. **Car hire** The quickest way to Siwa from Cairo is by car. Hire companies at the airport charge about US\$120 (about £80) per day for four-wheel drives (advisable).

### STAYING THERE

Double rooms at Adrère Amellai in Siwa cost between US\$350 and US\$450 per day (£230-£295), including all food and drink. Book through EQ (2-340 0052/8284 or 2-341 7879).