



Royal Wings

November-December 2006

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Egypt's Siwa Oasis

Story by Sarah Campbell

A land time forgot

Visiting the Siwa Oasis in Egypt's Western Desert is like stepping back in time, yet the commitment to environmentally friendly development and eco-tourism is decidedly 21st century

A sea of green, interspersed with towering, rock mountains and surrounded by the arid Sahara desert, the Siwa Oasis has been an important settlement outpost for desert communities since 10,000BCE. Linked to the outside world by only two roads, the fertile depression of Siwa is inhabited by an indigenous community that has only recently emerged from centuries of isolation from the rest of the world. It's also a model of sustainable development and one of the world's most perfect examples of eco-tourism, following investment, guidance and management from consultants Environmental Quality International (EQI), which has been privately investing in Siwa since 1997.

'Siwa is a place born of nature, springing from the earth, where all can experience wellbeing, happiness and joy,' says Mounir Neamatalla, Managing Director of EQI. 'This was my dream [when I first saw Siwa] and it became my deepest desire to put into practice the principles to which we at EQI have always been committed.'

Located about 70 kilometres east of the Libyan border, and the largest oasis in Egypt, Siwa has been a focal point for travellers from across the ages. In ancient times it was known as one of the world's most important

AN OASIS IS AN ISOLATED AREA OF VEGETATION IN A DESERT, TYPICALLY SURROUNDING A SPRING OR SIMILAR WATER SOURCE. THE LOCATION OF OASES HAS BEEN OF CRITICAL IMPORTANCE FOR TRADE AND TRANSPORTATION ROUTES IN DESERT AREAS. CARAVANS MUST TRAVEL VIA OASES IN ORDER THAT SUPPLIES OF WATER AND FOOD CAN BE REPLENISHED.

NATURE



LOCATED ABOUT 70 KILOMETRES EAST OF THE LIBYAN BORDER, SIWA IS THE LARGEST OASIS IN EGYPT AND IN ANCIENT TIMES WAS SEEN AS ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST IMPORTANT ORACLE SITES. TODAY IT IS HOME TO CELEBRATED ECO-LODGE, ADRÈRE AMELLAL

oracle sites, and it is said that Alexander the Great braved the dangers of the Sahara and travelled to Siwa on horseback to seek inspiration before he went on to conquer the world. As an oasis, it has also provided a much-needed place of refreshment for Bedouin tribes crossing the Sahara, with its 230 natural freshwater springs.

Covering an area of 1,125sq km and with a population of about 20,000, the oasis is made up of the town of Siwa and five villages. The population consists of approximately 47 per cent women and 53 per cent men, with 25 per cent of the population residing in remote rural villages. Its relative seclusion has allowed the Siwan community to maintain its unique cultural heritage and traditional practices. 'The Siwans originate from the North African Berbers known as Amazigh and have their own language, traditions and costumes,' explains Nour Abou Adal, marketing manager, EQI.

It is this unique cultural heritage, along with the eco-friendly way of life, which has led to Siwa becoming a favoured destination with eco-tourists. However, through careful management by EQI, the oasis has managed to maintain its charm and tourism has been kept to a minimum.

In 1997, EQI acquired 75 acres of palm and olive groves at the foot of a mountain cliff called Adfère Amellal (White Mountain in the native Siwa

Berber language) overlooking Lake Siwa. Built out of indig using traditional Siwan building techniques and styles s minimal impact on the land, the property at Adrère A example for eco-lodge development. Natural ventilation advantage of Siwa's dry desert climate, has been adopted need for expensive air conditioning. The lodge has been o on solar and alternative energies, and to recycle the wa water it produces. Food prepared at the lodge is predominantly locally grown.

Adrère Amellal consists of traditional Siwan 'Kershef' ho been restored and reconfigured into 39 rooms. Kershef, a salt and mud mixed with straw, has been used for building, and fixtures are made of palm trunks and fronds, and swimming pool is fed by a natural spring.

While Adrère Amellal may present the perfect 'get aw destination, EQI is determined that tourism will not imp local demographics, and there are certainly no plans for ex Amellal Oasis has reached its maturity; it is at its optimum expandable,' says Abou Adal. 'Its size is gauged by how n natural spring provides us. We simply listen to the sprin settings are our most important facilities,' she adds.

On the other side of Lake Siwa lies the village of Siwa century enclave of Shall, a collection of once-inhabited

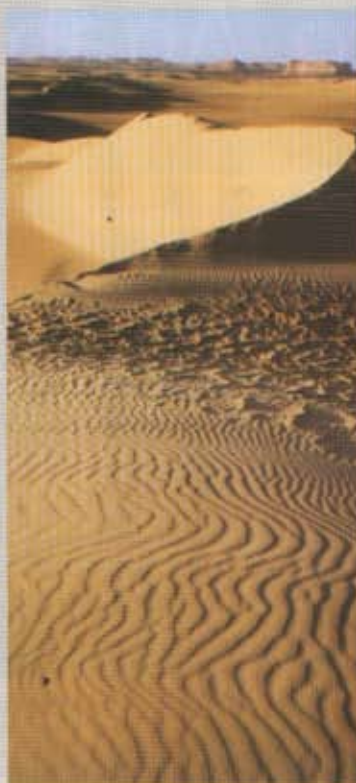


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built side-by-side along steep, narrow and winding dirt roads. In recent times, unusually heavy rains damaged the salt-mud-brick houses, leading the population to abandon Shali. In parallel with Adrère Amellal, EQI purchased a plot of land adjacent to Shali on which it built an eight-room lodge and restaurant using the same construction materials and techniques as in Adrère Amellal. Visitors find themselves immersed in an ancient city, free to roam around and investigate at leisure.

'Principally, we attract culturally sensitive travellers who enjoy natural sites and pristine environments – those who are looking for an authentic experience of life in the middle of the desert,' says Abou Adal, and she is quick to explain that this process also ensures that the tourists visiting Siwa respect the local area and culture. 'It's a self-selection process. When you are true to your guiding principles, something seems to happen that makes others embrace those very principles. We do not manage a tourism resort; we experience new relationships and invest a lot in training people on how to be sensitive to others, and the rest we leave to chance and nature,' she remarks.

Getting to Siwa may prove a bit of a trek; it takes eight hours to drive from Cairo or six hours from Alexandria but, once there, travellers will find themselves part of an ancient community. More importantly, EQI's initiatives have also provided a sustainable model for development that will hopefully help the Siwan community for thousands of years to come. ■



Community spirit Naturally, the local Siwan community has been heavily involved in this eco-tourism initiative, and EQI's influence has even stretched to agriculture and a cottage clothing industry. EQI relies on local people for the design, construction, furnishing, goods and services, and operational staffing of the two eco-lodges. Adrère Amellal employs 56 people while Shali Lodge provides 20 permanent jobs.

Eco-agriculture Managing an organic crop is hard work, and more expensive than growing crops using chemical fertilisers. Many Siwan farmers, faced with the challenges of low yields and high costs, were lured by the dollars to be made from crops grown using chemicals.

In partnership with the International Finance Corporation (IFC), EQI is now working to develop Siwa into a centre for organically grown produce and agro-culinary products, while improving the standard of living for Siwan farmers. The project, which is expected to benefit 300 to 450 farmers and 50 off-farm workers, aims to add value to Siwan agricultural produce by promoting the adoption of organic farming and farm management systems that are compatible with international certifications. Project components include a crop pre-financing scheme, a cattle-financing scheme, a renewable energy initiative and a packaging warehouse.

Fashionable heritage Siwa's cultural heritage includes a variety of unique arts and crafts, such as silver jewellery, basketry as well as embroidered and beaded garments and accessories.

Over time, many of these local crafts have deteriorated, as the younger generation of Siwans came to perceive traditional crafts as old fashioned and backward. The pressure to produce saleable items, coupled with the lack of access to good-quality raw materials, resulted in the production of mediocre items that relied on artificial dyes and synthetic materials.

In August 2001, EQI launched the Siwa Women's Native Artisanry Development Project as a community development intervention, designed to increase the empowerment and economic self-sufficiency of Siwan women through the revitalisation of traditional handicraft production and the promotion of a culture of artisanry. The project has provided home-based business opportunities for over 300 Siwan women who are applying their embroidery skills to a line of garments, accessories and household items that are exported to Europe as well as being sold through shops in Cairo and in Siwa.

Four lines of clothing are currently being produced under the brand name of Siwa Creations. These are a remake of the traditional *galabeyas* (shirt-dress), the *abbayas* (cloak), blouses and shawls. In addition, tableware items are also being produced. A separate line is produced for designs of the Florentine haute couture establishment Ermanno Scervino.