

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 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 meters 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.” “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."