

Travel

Adrère Amellal — an oasis of calm

With visitors deterred by security warnings, a magical ecolodge in Egypt's Western Desert has been pushed even further off the beaten track

Heba Saleh NOVEMBER 23 2018

Our caravan of a dozen 4x4s came to a sudden stop at the crest of a sand dune near Siwa Oasis, and the drivers told us to dismount. The sun had just set and the sky was full of stars. As our bemused group of about 70 people advanced a few steps to look down over the edge of the dune, we spotted an elegant scene of candlelit dinner tables arranged on the desert floor and surrounded by burning torches. Drinks were ready at a makeshift bar, to be followed by a meal of smoky aubergine, roast quail in pomegranate syrup and a baked pumpkin dessert. But first we had to negotiate our way down the high slope, feet sinking in the sand, guided only by light from mobile phones.

Our host was Mounir Neamatalla, owner of an ecolodge in Siwa called Adrère Amellal. He had invited a large group of foreign ambassadors — including diplomats from France, Sweden, Belgium, Singapore and South Korea — with one purpose in mind: to demonstrate that Siwa is safe, even though it is only 90km from the border with lawless Libya. He wants governments to rethink their warnings to citizens: the UK Foreign Office, for example, advises against all but essential travel to the region. The US State Department says its citizens should not travel anywhere in Egypt's Western Desert.



The earth-coloured hotel, inspired by the ruined hilltop village © Heba Saleh

Sitting in a palm grove at his hotel on the edge of one of Siwa's salt lakes Neamatalla argues that it was “unfair” to deprive the oasis of visitors just because it is near Libya and even though it has been completely peaceful to date. “If you pull the rug from under the feet of the locals, they will have to think of another means of earning a livelihood,” he says. “So we need to take preventive action rather than wait for things to fall apart then think of mitigating measures. Without tourism you are handing the people over to another industry; it could be that of contraband or terror.”

For Neamatalla, as for many other tourism operators in Egypt, 2018 is shaping up to be the best year since the 2011 revolution that overthrew Hosni Mubarak as president and unleashed a series of major upheavals that scared away visitors. But Siwa, a unique oasis inhabited by Egypt's only Berbers — a north African people found in Libya and the other countries of the Maghreb — is still off the beaten track and a long way from tourist centres clustered around the Nile Valley and the Red Sea. There are no scheduled flights; our group flew on a plane hired from an oil services company and landed at a military airport. The road trip from Cairo takes about eight hours.



Adrère Amellal means White Mountain in the Berber tongue spoken here and refers to the massive limestone cliff under which the hotel sits. Built in 2000 with the local material used in the oasis for centuries and known as *kershef* — a mix of salt rock and clay — the earth-coloured hotel appears to be almost an organic outcrop of its environment. Its layout defies easy description: clusters of buildings, some square, some rounded, stand separately or huddled together, connected by corridors, terraces and staircases. Neamatalla says it is inspired by Shali, the ancient ruined hilltop village that stands in the middle of the oasis. Asked to name the hotel's architect, he would only say it was designed by "the spirits that guard the mountain".

In order to minimise its impact on the environment, Adrère Amellal has no electricity and relies on water from one of the 200 springs in the oasis. Interiors are simple and comfortable with chairs made of palm leaves and beds and night tables carved out of salt rock. Neamatalla says the capacity of the spring limits the size of the hotel to 50 rooms. He is opposed on environmental grounds to digging wells to expand the water supply and accommodate more people because it would speed up the depletion of the underground water reservoir.



Adrère Amellal's veranda with chairs made of palm leaves © Heba Saleh

There are no locks or keys on the doors — a feature that enhances the friendly feel of the place. The attentive staff come in when guests leave their rooms to blow out candles and replace the ones that have burnt out. It took me a day to stop reaching for the non-existent light switch and to reconcile myself to not checking my face in the mirror before heading for dinner with that illustrious company. Those wedded to their mobile phones had to ration their use to save battery power.

Beyond the hotel, which offers the possibility of swimming in its spring-fed pool or the salt lake, Siwa offers many attractions. Chief among them is Shali, the ruined fortress that dates back to the 12TH century and, the story goes, was built by 40 men from a dwindling population of seven Berber families to protect themselves against raids by Bedouin desert tribes. In the daytime the inhabitants worked the fertile fields of the oasis where olive and palm trees grow and at night retired to their fortified village. Limited by space on the hilltop, the Siwans expanded their settlement over the centuries by building upwards, adding new floors to their homes. But in 1927 disaster struck: three days of freak torrential rain in the normally dry oasis melted the mud buildings. The Siwans abandoned the fortress to build new dwellings around it in the same style, often reusing the *kershef* from their ruined homes.



The hotel is on the edge of one of Siwa's salt lakes © Heba Saleh

Other sites include the ancient Temple of the Oracle of Amun, dating back to the reign of King Amasis, who ruled between 570 and 526BC. Not much remains of the inscriptions on the walls of the temple, but parts of the structure are still standing and the site affords magnificent views over the palms and shimmering lakes of the oasis.

Aside from the antiquities, Siwa's great attraction is the Great Sea of Sand extending all the way to Libya. Nothing is more exhilarating than a ride in a 4x4 roaring up a steep dune, balancing on the crest, then sliding down the slope on the other side. In Siwa's immediate surroundings, the dunes provide great views of the oasis itself with its cliffs and lakes. Beyond, there are sites such as the picturesque Bir Wahed, a warm sulphurous spring in the desert with a nearby cold-water pool — ideal for swimming.

So will tourists go back to Siwa after this high-profile visit? It is certainly Neamatalla's hope. It may take more than the impressions of diplomats on a fun weekend to sway governments to amend their travel advice, but there were murmurs among the visitors about possibly approving trips on a case-by-case basis or only if groups were flown in. In the meantime, Siwa remains an amazing destination, with few visitors around and all its attractions to sample in peace and quiet.

Details

Heba Saleh was a guest of [Adrère Amellal](#), which has double rooms from \$605. The hotel can organise flights; prices depend on group size — 10 people would pay \$1,500 each, return. Visitors should check their travel insurance, which might be invalidated as a result of the government warnings

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