

THE BAHARIYA OASIS: THE WESTERN DESERT

Journey with 20 million dollars



Why pay 20 million dollars for a trip into space when you can go to the moon for so much less? OK, it's not really the moon, but the landscape is surreal; alien in every way, and it changes from one moment to the next. It is a land not yet fully explored. This is the Oasis in the western desert.

Baharia oasis and ancient Egyptian history

Baharia, known since ancient times as the 'Northern Oasis' is situated in a depression about 100km long by 40km wide and completely surrounded by high black cliffs . The valley floor is covered with green gardens of palms, ancient springs and wells and is spread with numerous conical hills which probably once formed islands in a great lake during Prehistoric times.



Bahariya was an important centre of agriculture and wine production and a source of minerals since Pharaonic times. Unfortunately few of the sites from this period have been excavated and what little is known of Bahariya's early history is documented in **tomb paintings in the Nile Valley**, mostly from the Middle Kingdom and early New Kingdom. A scene in the tomb of the **Vizier Rehmire** at Thebes from Dynasty XVIII, shows people of the '**Northern Oasis**' wearing striped kilts and presenting tribute. The oasis began to flourish during **Libyan rule** of Egypt in the Third Intermediate Period as a main route from the Libyan border to the Nile Valley and a strategic crossing of several caravan routes to other oases. By Dynasty XXVI Bahariya had its own native governors and had grown into an important centre of trade. Near **Bawiti** are the tomb of a Dynasty XIX provincial governor **Amenhotep Huy** and several tombs of Dynasty XXVI governors of the region, as well as an ibis cemetery from the same period. There are also two temples, one dating to King Apries of Dynasty XXVI and the other to the reign of the Greek ruler **Alexander the great**.



Baharia oasis and Greco –roman history

Until recently the little knowledge we have had of the Romans in Bahariya came mostly from a large quantity of Roman Papyri found at **Oxyrhynchus (el-Bahnasa)**, which tell us that the oasis was garrisoned by Roman troops taken from the larger station there. The presence of many Roman ruins and an elaborate system of aqueducts (ways) suggests that Bahariya was heavily populated during this period. In March 1996 a guard riding his donkey from the Temple of Alexander.

Baharia and the great discovery

This began an excavation which led to the astonishing discovery of a vast necropolis containing possibly as many as 10,000 well-preserved **mummies of Greco-Roman**, some wearing spectacular golden facemasks. Bahariya, long considered to be a backwater in Egyptian history, has now become one of the most important archaeological sites in Egypt and famous all over the world for its '**Valley of the Golden Mummies**'.

Baharia through monotheistic religions

The people of Bahariya seem to have great interest to their traditional beliefs. After the Roman decline Bahariya had a strong Christian population and even had its own bishop, although there is **a suggestion by archaeologists** that there may still have been followers of the more ancient pagan cults during this time. Even though Islam was brought to the oasis as early as the 7th century, Christianity remained strong in Bahariya longer than in any of the other oases, at the 17th century, and no monuments from the Islamic Period have yet been found.

The important villages at baharia

When the Egyptian archaeologist **Ahmed Fakhery** first visited Bahariya in **1938**, the journey took two or three days by car from Cairo. There were then four principal villages in the oasis – **the twin villages of Bawiti and el-Qasr** and at 8km east, **Mandishah and el-Zabw**. Today Bawiti is a modern administrative town and has swallowed up the older sections of the twin villages, which are slowly being abandoned and falling into ruin. There are many ancient monuments, springs and gardens close to the town to entice tourists and **for this reason** several hotels have been built in recent years. Because of increasing media attention, many of Bahariya's sites are currently under excavation **by the Supreme Council of**

Antiquities and so most of the sites are officially closed. The visitor must request permission from the local antiquities authorities before going to view the sites. The sites open will vary from time to time.

Some attraction at baharia

Chrystal Mountain



Its location

If travelling north from Farafra to Bahariya, it is worth stopping at Gebel el-Izaz, or 'Crystal Mountain', about 25km before reaching the escarpment on the modern road down into Bahariya Oasis.

Features of this mountain

This small mountain is formed with a large proportion of quartz crystal, and gives a wonderful view over the desert from the top. One of rocks has a hole in the centre and there are lots of small pieces of crystal around it.



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Bahariya has a very rich history and is said to have been the first settlement in Egypt. It is therefore not surprising that many ancient sites are being found. Above left is the tomb of Zed-Amun Wf Ankh, who ruled the areas at one point.

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