

Holy Family Route in Egypt Christian Pilgrimage

Introduction:

Egypt was, and still is, the land of refuge in the widest sense of the word, a place of tolerance for people, races, cultures, and religions. On the land of Egypt, Moses and Jesus lived. Hence, Egypt enjoys a great position and quite a great deal of mentions in both the Old-Testament as well as the New-Testament.

The Holy Family sought refuge in Egypt, and this is considered to be an event of the utmost significance in Egypt's long history.

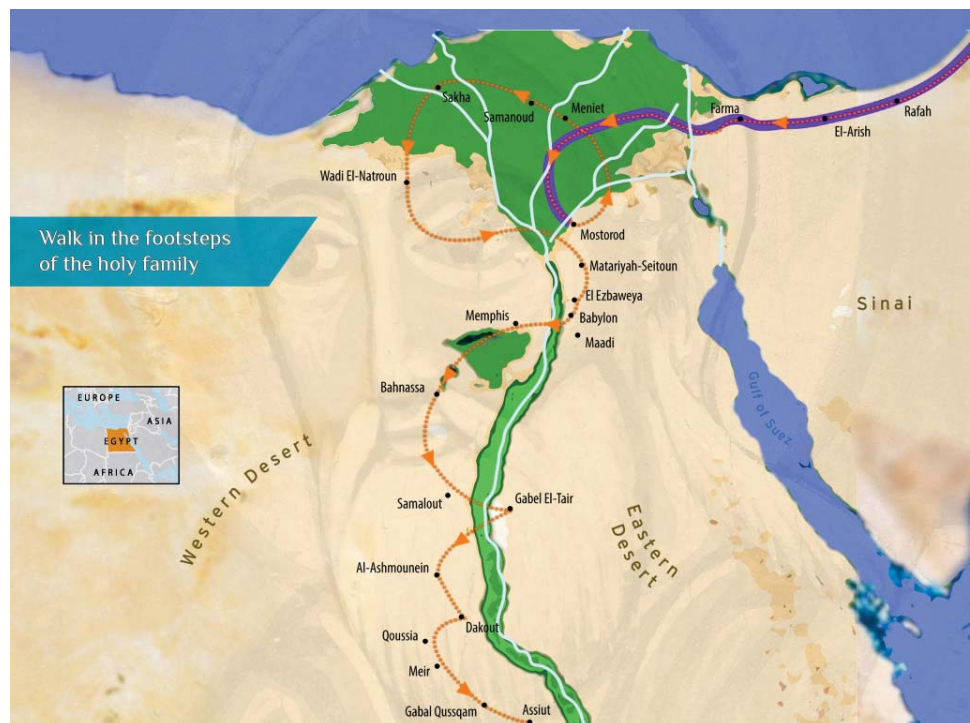
The story of the holy family's journey from Palestine to Egypt has long been recorded with dedication by historians and authors around the world. Egyptians look with fondness and pride on the passage of the holy mother and her child through the land of Egypt, and the fact that they found solace here.

For the Christian believers, God's message was delivered through the prophetic words of Isaiah:

"In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt; and a Pillar to the Lord, at its border. And it will be for a sign and for a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt." (Isaiah 19:19 & 20).

According to the traditions of the Coptic Church, 'the altar' mentioned in

Isaiah is that of the Church of Virgin Mary, in Al-Muharraq Monastery. This is a site where the Holy Family settled for a period of more than six months; and the altar-stone was the bed upon which the Infant saviour lay. Al-Muharraq Monastery is located "in the midst of the land of Egypt", standing at its exact geographical center (in Asyut Governorate).





The flight to Egypt

The Virgin Mary gave birth to Jesus in Bethlehem of Judaea in Palestine. Upon his birth, wise men preached to the people of the city, declaring that Jesus was the chosen one, and that, "according to prophecies" they had seen in the stars, he would become the next king of the Jews. Upon hearing the news, King Herod was overcome by terror at the possibility of losing his throne. He decided that killing Jesus was the only way to protect his royal status.

In a dream, Joseph, the carpenter, was ordered by God to escort Jesus and his mother to Egypt, where they would find refuge. Joseph complied and a donkey was fetched for the gentle Mother to ride with her newborn child in her arms. They set out from Bethlehem on their predestined journey. In this situation, Virgin Mary would have been seated on the donkey, holding child Jesus in her arms and Joseph would have walked by their side, leading the way.

The holy family in Sinai

Werner Keller writes in his book, *The Bible as History* (1955) has said, "A day's journey from Gaza brought the holy family to the ancient township of Jenysos, which is mentioned by Herodotus, the Greek historian." Today, this village, which is part of the Gaza Strip, is known as Khan Younis. "The next town on the holy family's route would have been Raphia (Rafah), the frontier town between the Gaza Strip and the province of Egypt."

Continuing for another 44 kilometers, beyond Raphia, and after almost two days of travelling, the mother and child reached Wadi Al-Arish, a point at which they are safe enough to obtain food and shelter. The holy family passes by other towns in Sinai such as Al-Muhammadia and the Ancient Egyptian city of Pelusium (Now called Al-Farma - located 20 miles southeast of Port Said) where churches from the 5th and 6th Century have recently been discovered.

Route to the Nile Delta

Mostorod: The holy family continued on its trip to the Nile Delta, stopping at the city of Mostorod where "The Virgin Lady", a 12th Century church, was found in the city.

The city lies about six miles away from Cairo. It came to be called 'Al- Mahamma'), which means 'the Bathing Place'. The name was given to the town because here the Virgin Mary bathed the Christ Child and washed his clothes. On their return to journey to Palestine, the Holy Family stopped once more at Mostorod, and this time caused a spring to well up from the earth. The spring still flows to the present day.

After leaving Mostorod and passing by Belbes, the holy family travel west to Wadi El Natrun, crossing the western branch of the Nile (the Rasheed branch).



The holy family in Cairo

The Holy Family has settled in Al-Mataraya district near Heliopolis. They find shade under a sycamore tree that came to be known as “Mariam’s Tree,” which has evolved into an engrossing attraction for religious tourists. The holy “Mayron oil,” or the “Chrism,” is nowadays prepared from the oil of the tree.



An ancient church was built in the area by the name of “The Virgin Mary” and is visited by people to this day. Paintings can be found inside the church, including maps of the holy family’s journey, as well as a statue of Jesus and his blessed mother guarded by Joseph the Carpenter.

Al-Matarya district became the most popular shrine in Egypt; a place where people flooded to for blessings and spiritual remedies.

The second district visited by the holy family in Cairo was Al-Zeitun, where a church by the name “The Virgin Mary” was constructed in Toman Bey Street. It is said that appearances of the blessed lady were witnessed around the domes of the church up until recent years.

Another spot visited by the holy family was Zowela Avenue in El-Gamaleya district. An ancient church is found there with the same name, “The Virgin Mary”. It is considered one of the largest churches in Egypt and is distinguished by its basaltic style.

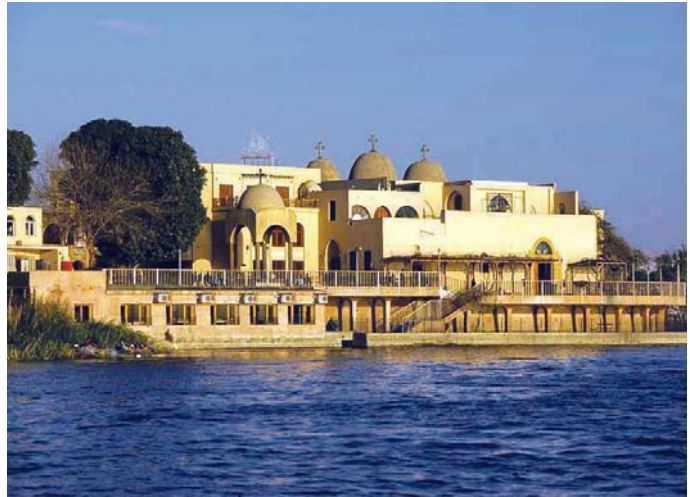
The holy family moved on dwelling for a short time in a cave in Abi Serja’s Church, within the walls of the Roman Babylon fortress. The cave is about 20 feet tall, 15 feet wide and does not have any windows. Then they moved to Maadi district (an outlying district of Memphis, which was then the capital of Egypt) and settled at the location.

The Holy Family in Upper-Egypt:

At Maadi, the Holy Family boarded a sailboat which carried them up the Nile towards southern Egypt. A historic church was built upon the spot from which they embarked. The church was given the name Al-Adaweya, the Virgin’s Church of the Ferry. Today Maadi has a reputation for being green and more serene than the urban Cairo.



The stone steps leading down to the river's bank are believed to have been used by the Holy Family. These steps are accessible to pilgrims through the church courtyard. An event that many consider a miracle occurred here in 1976. On that date a Holy Bible of unknown origin floated down the Nile River to the bank below the Church. It was open to the page of Isaiah 19:25, the page declaring, "Blessed be Egypt My People". The Bible is now behind glass in the Sanctuary of the Virgin within the Virgin's Church of the Ferry, displayed for all to see.



The Holy Family's sailboat then docked at the village of Deir Al-Garnous, six miles west of Ashnein el Nassara, a small village in Minya Governorate.



Outside the western wall of the Church of the Virgin lies a deep well that is believed to have provided the Holy Family with water.

They continued on to a spot later named Abai Issous, "the Home of Jesus", the site of present-day Sandafa village, some 10.5 miles west of the town of Beni Mazar in Minya Governorate.

Heading southwards to Samalout from which they crossed the Nile again to the east bank of the river, to Gabal El Tair where Family rested in a cave which is now located inside Gabal El-Tair's ancient church. Coptic tradition maintains that as the Holy Family rested in the shade of the mountain, Jesus stretched his hand to hold back a rock which was about to detach itself from the mountainside and fall upon them. The imprint of the Christ child's palm is still visible upon the rock.



When the Holy Family resumed their travel,

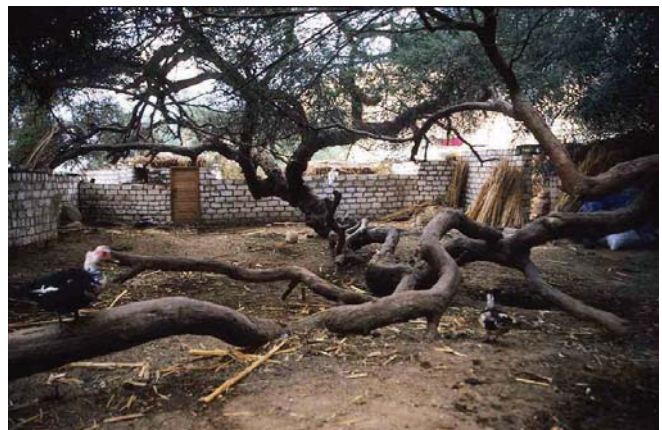


they passed a laurel tree a stone's throw south of Gabal El-Tair, along the pathway flanking the Nile and leading from the mountain to Nazlet Ebeid and the New Minya Bridge of today. It is claimed that this tree bowed to the Christ as he was passing. The configuration of the tree is unique, with all of its branches inclining downwards, trailing on the ground, and then turning upwards again. They call the tree Al Abed, "The Worshipper".

It was now time for the Holy Family to set out for what many would describe as their most meaningful destination in the land of Egypt, the place where it was written there would be "an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt."

Al-Muharraq Monastery nestles against the western foothills of Mount Qussam. The monastery was built on the same grounds where the Holy Family remained for just over six months. Their time was spent mainly in a cave on the site.

The Church of the Holy Virgin Mary is the oldest church in the monastery and is believed to date to the 1st Century AD. The church's altar stone is said to have been the resting place of child Jesus during the months he lived there.





It is believed that at the Al-Muharraq Monastery the Angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, and said, *“Arise, and take the young Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for they are dead which sought the young Child’s life.”* (Matthew 2:20 & 21).

Al-Muharraq Monastery is sure to be a stirring experience for your Christian heritage clients. The monastery and its surroundings has such a hallowed ambience the Copts of Egypt named the site the Second Bethlehem. A 13th Century historian wrote that multitudes of pilgrims made the journey to the monastery during ancient times, and that the site was well known for the healing of many diseases.

As the Holy Family set forth on their return journey, the route they took deviated slightly from the one by which they had come. It took them to Mount Dronka, five miles southwest of the city of Assiut. Their blessing of this location was commemorated in the Christian era by the building of the mountaintop Monastery of Dronka, which dates from the first century. It is said that from time to time, the Virgin Mary appears in luminous form within the monastery’s chapel.

In the book History of the Coptic Nation (“Coptic” means “Egyptian,” and Christians living in Egypt identify themselves as Coptic Christians), author Samy Saleh records that the holy family took the same route on their journey back to Palestine. They first go to Maadi, passing through Old Cairo, then follow the road to Heliopolis, back to the city of Mostorod, and finally El-Arish, and from there to Gaza.

The whole journey through Egypt, from the initial flight from Bethlehem to the return to Nazareth lasted over three years and covered approximately 1,240 miles.





Holy Family Tourist Itineraries:

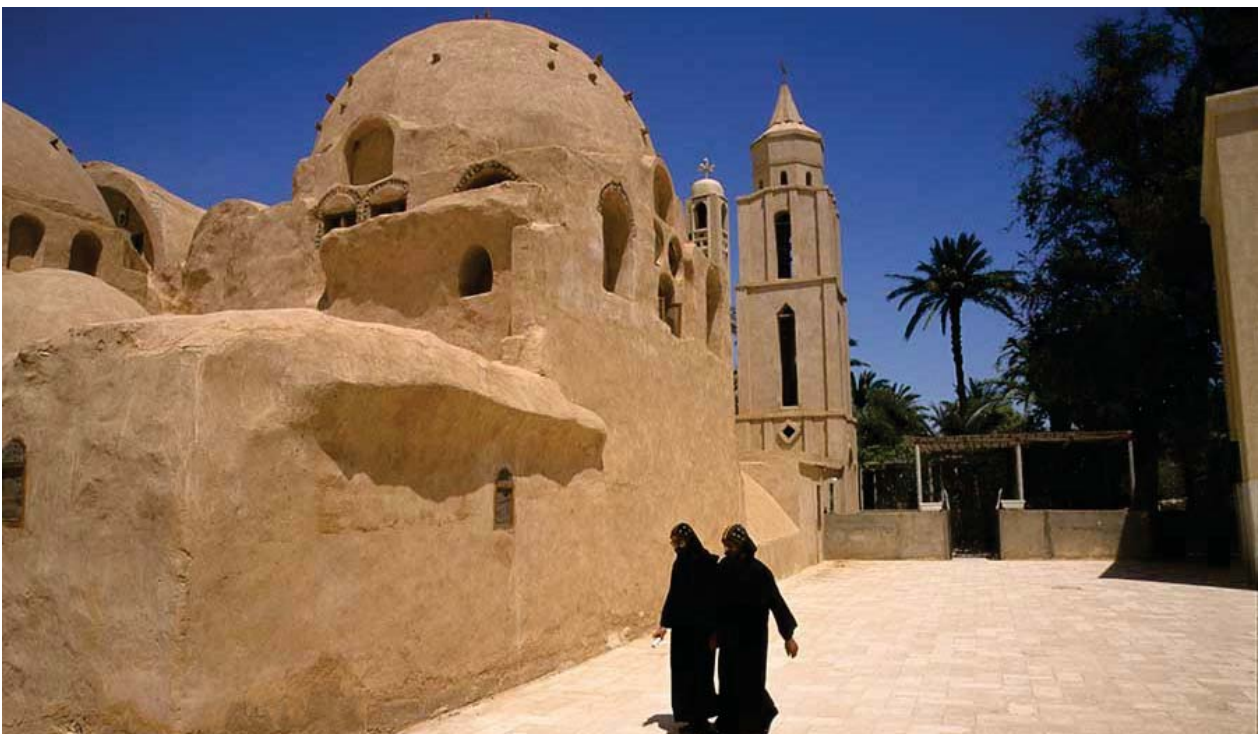
Your Christian clients will find it a stirring experience to relive the same atmosphere. They'll learn firsthand about the singular blessing Egypt received on being chosen as the Holy Family's haven.

Egyptian DMCs offer a variety of Christian-based tours to Egypt, with one of the most popular being tours that retrace the Holy Family's travels through Egypt. These tours include major sites such as Mount Sinai, the monasteries at Wadi El Natrun, and a variety of Coptic churches, along with overnights in Cairo.

In those times long ago, there were three well-known routes which could be followed by travellers traversing the Sinai Peninsula from Palestine to Egypt. The crossing was usually undertaken in groups, under the protection of well-organised caravans. The Holy Family had an even harder time of it, since they were on their own and they had to avoid the beaten tracks altogether. Instead they had to pursue unknown paths, picking their way across the rugged Sinai landscape through hidden valleys and across uncharted plateaus. Your clients will thrill walking along the Holy Family's footsteps.

The Holy Family was faced with challenge-after-challenge during their arduous journey across Egypt. Modern day tourists will find it a much different experience, where they can access these important religious sites, while still enjoying modern comforts in a private van or tour bus, with five-star hotels waiting for them at the end of the day.

It would be hard to find a more passionate group of travellers than the Christian travel market. Egypt has many Christian sites that can be combined into a stirring multi-day faith-based itinerary.





In 2017, for the first time, Egypt was added to Vatican's official pilgrimage list encouraging more Catholics of visiting Egypt separately or within their pilgrimage packages.

Hereby is an example of an itinerary that covers the main spots of the Holy Family flight in Egypt:

Day 1: Arrival and generic sightseeing

- Arrival at Cairo Airport, meet & Assist, Check-in in one of the hotels in Cairo downtown or east of Cairo.
- A short trip to the Pyramids Plateau.
- Overnight in Cairo

Day 2: Tel Basta & Belbis

- Breakfast at the hotel.
- Transfer by AC-van to the town of Babastis; It is now known as Tel- Basta, about 83 km north-east of Cairo, there Jesus gushed forth a spring of water to drink.
- A 21-km transfer to Belbeis (ancient Philippos). The Holy Family rested there in the shade of a tree which came to be called, "The Virgin Mary's Tree". Visit Saint George Church.
- Back to Cairo (About 67 km).
- Overnight in Cairo.

Day 3: Sakha & Samannoud

- Breakfast at the hotel.
- Transfer by AC-van to Sakha about 130 km North of Cairo.
- Visit Virgin Mary Church to see the foot print of Jesus Christ.
- Transfer to Samannoud (about 44 km) where the holy family crossed the River Nile to the city of Samanoud inside the Delta and they were received by its people in a pleasant way, and so the people were blessed by Jesus Christ.
- Visit Saint Abanoub Church. There is also a holy well where the holy family used to drink.
- Lunch in a local restaurant in Tanta city.
- Back to Cairo about 112 km.
- Overnight at the hotel.

Day 4: Wadi El Natrun

- Breakfast at the hotel.
- Transfer by AC-van to Wadi El Natrun. According to tradition, Jesus Christ blessed the four directions of the valley. Wadi El- Natrun is considered to be the home of asceticism and worship, with four monasteries still existing today including: Deir al-Baramus which is the oldest of them, Deir Anba Bishoy whose body is still in the monastery, Abu Makar Monastery and Deir El-Suryani.
- Lunch in a rest-house.
- back to Cairo (about 123 km).
- Overnight at the hotel.



Day 5: Mostorod & Matariya:

- Breakfast at the hotel.
- Transfer to Mostorod to visit Virgin Mary Church.
- Visit the Holy well and Holy Mary Tree at Matariya on the outskirts of Cairo.
- Lunch at local restaurant in Cairo.
- Some selection of other interesting churches in Cairo downtown such as:
 - The Cathedral of St Mark in Azbekieh
 - The Church of St George the Martyr
 - The Church of St. Mercurios Abu Sefein
 - The Convent of the Virgin Mary
 - The Convent of St George
- Overnight at the hotel.

Day 6: Old Cairo Churches:

- Breakfast at the hotel.
- Visit to the Fortress of Babylon section of Old Cairo with selection of the following sites:
 - The Church of Abu Serga and the Crypt of the Holy Family beneath it.
 - Al-Muallaqa (Hanging Church), dedicated to the Virgin Mary, Patriarchal See of the Coptic Church in the early centuries.
 - The Church of St Barbara.
 - The Church of St George (in the Palace of Waxworks).
 - The Church of the Virgin, identified by its alternative name of Qasriet Al-Rihan (Basil Pot).
 - The Convent of St George.
 - The Coptic Museum and the ramparts of the Fortress of Babylon.
- Lunch at a local restaurant.
- Visit of the Fustat section of Old Cairo, with a selection of the following sites:
 - The Church of St Mercurios Abu Sefein
 - The Church of Amba Shenouda
 - The Church of the Virgin Mary of Al-Demshiria
 - The Convent of Abu Sefein
 - The Church of the Virgin of Babylon El Darag
 - The Church of Saints Abakir and Yohanna
 - The Church of Prince Tadros Al Mishriqi
 - The Church of the Archangel Mikhail (known also as Al-Malak Al-Qibli, or 'Southern Angel')
 - The Church of St. Mena in Zahraa - Misr El Kadima
- Overnight at the hotel.

Day 7: Cairo to Al Minya Tour

- Breakfast at the hotel in Cairo- Check-out.
- Transfer by AC-van to Maadi to visit church of Holy virgin Mary and the miracle book.
- Transfer to Al Minya (about 264 km - 3 hours).
- Arrive Al Minya- Check-in at the hotel.
- Visit of Gabal Al-Teir Monastery.
- Overnight in Al Minya.



Day 8: Minya to Asyut

- Breakfast at your hotel in Minya – Check-out.
- Continue driving south to visit The White Monastery, which was built in 400 AD by St. Senouda, who constructed the monastery using blocks from ancient Egyptian buildings. This monastery used to house over 2000 monks.
- Transfer to the Monastery of Al Muharraq in Asyut- the last spot of the Holy Family trip in Egypt. It was built around the area where the Holy Family remained just over six months.

Options to complete the itinerary:

- Option 1: Fly directly from Asyut International Airport to India via Sharjah on Air Arabia or via Kuwait on Jazeera Airlines.
- Option 2: Continue the trip to connect the classic tour between Luxor and Aswan.
- Option 3: Return back to Cairo by flight/train/van connecting to India by EgyptAir or other carriers.