

# EGYPT

*“My AFS experience is one that changed my life forever. I did a six-month community service program in Egypt, working with many of Egypt’s street children. For my going away, the children all wrote me letters in the best English they could, and they all made a big poster with pictures and drawings that they all signed. They also gave me a beautiful map of Egypt and gold and black wall hanging from the Islamic religion. When it was time to leave, it was so hard to say good-bye to everyone. I kept turning around as I was walking out the door, and I would just freeze, with tears rolling down my cheeks seeing them wave good-bye and blow kisses to me. I will never forget their beautiful big smiles.” Amanda Sadlier, participant from Canada, 2002.*

*“I have learned so much, especially from the disabled children I work with. They always smile and see everything positive; and I know when I am in a sad situation that my circumstances will always be better than the ones of the children who never forget to smile.” Samia Benfyala, participant from France, 2003*

Egypt’s ancient temples and pyramids have lured vacationing tourists for more than two millennia. Today, the country embraces a unique social stew, incorporating ancient traditions, modern Islam and Christianity, Middle Eastern art and folk cultures, and Western music and films. Because 90% of Egypt is desert, almost everyone lives close to the Nile, and crowding intensifies the ferment. In sprawling, cacophonous Cairo, robes are as common as Levis, donkeys share roadways with BMWs, and buildings made of mud stand next to glass-and-steel high-rises. Buffeted by so many influences, Egyptians remain religiously pious, devoted to their families, hospitable toward strangers, and sceptical that economic progress—in the Western sense—improves the quality of their unhurried lives.

## **Community Service Program**

AFS’s Community Service program gives you the opportunity to share in and contribute to the life of a community in Egypt by living and working alongside its members in a community-based service organization. As a developing country, Egypt has a strong need for community service in all aspects and an increasing need for volunteers who will dedicate their time and effort in that direction. At your organization, you will be asked to pitch in and offer assistance in whatever capacity might be needed and to share the knowledge and experience you have gained from your home culture in the process. No one expects you to be an expert with all the answers to local problems or the ability to change local conditions. Rather, you are expected to be a willing participant in a process of mutual discovery. This experience will present you with innumerable learning opportunities both personally and professionally. You will not be limited by a specific job description; rather, you will be given the chance to create and explore your abilities within a broad framework.

Worldwide, AFS Community Service program participants contribute their talents and energies to a variety of social programs that range from protecting the environment to teaching children or adults, from assisting the elderly and the disabled to defending human rights, from enhancing public health to helping local businesses become established.

Past participants in Egypt have worked with street children, mentally and physically disabled children, orphanages and educational projects in rural Egypt and hospitals. However, all specifics—including assignments, orientations, logistics and activities—vary depending on the program cycle.

## **AFS & Your Experience**

The community service program in Egypt started in September 1998. Our first participants came from Belgium to work with street children in one of the largest organizations in this field. The success of this experience encouraged more organizations to host more volunteers and inspired young people to come to Egypt as a part of a greater mission to help those in need. Since then, we have hosted participants from Belgium Flanders, Belgium French, Canada, France, Germany and Switzerland. We have also sent Egyptian participants to community service programs in Belgium, Brazil, Denmark and Portugal.

## **Orientations**

Participants arrive at Cairo International Airport and are met by AFS staff and volunteers in red T-shirts who escort them to a two-day “survival orientation” on the outskirts of Cairo. This orientation introduces participants to their new culture, explains the projects and expectations for participants, discusses family life in Egypt, introduces participants to their counsellors and answers participants’ questions. After completing the orientation, participants are picked up by their host families or they travel by bus or train to their host communities. Once in their host communities, participants will be given Arabic language lessons provided by their work sites, approximately two hours per week. These lessons mainly focus on colloquial rather than on classical Arabic.

In addition to an orientation at your arrival, AFS Egypt will provide you with several others. AFS orientations offer participants a chance to meet for several days and talk about expectations for the future program and past experiences. Orientations involve participating in group activities and self-examination. Sessions also provide language training as well as new information and ways of looking at things, while also allowing participants to share points of view. AFS orientations are social, interactive and educational, bringing together people from many countries and helping them to better understand their own intercultural learning experiences while preparing them to handle their community service assignments.

## **Living in Egypt**

### **Living arrangements**

Some participants in AFS Community Service programs live with local families, sharing their daily lives, their meals and perhaps a host sibling’s bedroom. Other participants live where their community service organization conducts its business. Still others live in rooms provided elsewhere by their local service organizations. Participants not hosted by Egyptian families spend weekends with Egyptian families to guarantee that they experience family life in Egypt.

### **Lifestyle of the Egyptians**

While Egyptian life is centred on family and religion, there remains a great difference between the rural and urban peoples of Egypt. Generally speaking, life outside the country’s major cities is in keeping with tradition. Communities are patriarchal, with men in dominant roles. Family ties are very strong and neighbours are often treated as family. People in urban centers such as Cairo and Alexandria still maintain these traditional values but to a lesser extent. They tend to follow a more modern and Westernized lifestyle.

Even though it has become commonplace on the streets of the main urban centers, particularly Cairo and Alexandria, to see women dressed in Western fashion (short skirts, tight trousers, sleeveless shirts), it is not very much accepted by the average Egyptian citizen. Women are still expected to comply with the traditional and conservative culture of Egypt by dressing conservatively and moderately.

In cities, the majority of Egyptians live in apartments due to the scarcity of land. Ornate furniture, colourful wall hangings and expensive ornaments are popular. In most houses (Muslim and Christian), families hang decorations reflecting their faith, such as ornaments of Jesus Christ, Mother Mary, different Saints, verses from the Quran and the name of God in different Arabic writing styles. Shopping at outdoor bazaars, shopping malls, going to the cinema, spending a day in a sports club and visiting relatives are favourite family activities. For the most part, Egyptians are extremely patriotic and are known for their helpfulness and friendliness.

### **Typical day**

The working hours in Egypt are usually six to eight hours a day. Usually, people stop working at about 3:00 or 4:00 p.m. The weekend is Friday and Saturday. In addition, there are quite a few public holidays. Government facilities and embassies have the shortest working days. In general, the public sector takes Friday off (some take Thursday or Saturday off in addition). Private sectors have a two-day weekend, usually Friday and Saturday/Sunday. During the holy month of Ramadan, the workday is shorter, to give people sufficient time to go home by sunset (fast-breaking time). Thursday night is a night of leisure for everyone. It is the time for family members to spend time together, possibly visit other relatives, and for teenagers and young people to go out. Friday is usually dedicated to family activities.

## **Diet and Meals**

Egyptian cuisine reflects the country's melting-pot history. Native cooks have adapted Greek, Lebanese, Palestinian, Syrian and Turkish, dishes to accommodate the country's customs, tastes, local ingredients and budgets. The dishes are simple, made with fresh fruits and vegetables and seasoned with spices. Bread is the mainstay of Egyptian diets and comes in several forms. *Aysh shami*, a flat, pita-type bread made with refined white flour is the most common. Rice and fava beans, cooked in a variety of ways, are other staples.

Typically, most Egyptians begin the day with a light breakfast of *foul* and falafel (cooked beans or bean cakes), eggs and/or pickles, cheeses and jams. Most families eat a large, starchy lunch around mid-afternoon and follow it with a siesta. Dinner usually consists of lighter fare.

For most Egyptian families, beef is a luxury used in small amounts, cooked with vegetables and served with rice. So there are a lot of vegetarian dishes. If you are a vegetarian, it will not be hard to find something to eat. Few people in Egypt choose to be vegetarian, however, so your host family or others will probably not understand what the concept of vegetarianism is about.

## **Dress and Appearance**

Egyptian men and women tend to dress conservatively, in accordance with their Islamic beliefs. Both must be decently covered, especially the women. In recent years, however, Western styles of dress have become popular throughout the country.

Even teenage boys and girls are required to cover their shoulders, and girls' skirts must be knee-length, due to religious customs. Girls may opt to wear long (to the floor) skirts. In fact, this is much cooler than jeans during Egypt's hot months. However, if you go clubbing on weekends, customs are different. You may dress very "out-on-the-town" Western but generally you must wear a jacket to cover up a snazzy outfit until you get inside the club. Wearing such dress on the street would be considered offensive to the public at large. It is advisable to remain conservative in your clothing while going to clubs to avoid being harassed by drunks and young men. It is very important to ask your host family about the appropriateness of dressing in such a way.

For men, shorts are only worn on the beach. Elsewhere, shorts are inappropriate. But T-shirts are no problem. Egyptians try to keep their clothes tidy. So you should avoid clothes that have holes or look scruffy. Men with long hair will get misunderstanding looks, as this is considered to be girlish. Dreadlocks are very uncommon in Egypt, so if you have them, you will be quite an attraction. Most people will think that you never wash nor comb your hair. It is neither common nor accepted for men to wear earrings, pierce their noses, tongues or other parts of their body. You are strongly advised to remove any piercing before you arrive in Egypt. It is also not accepted for men to dye their hair.

Egypt is an Islamic country, and most women do not dress as revealingly as in some Western countries. So women should bring blouses, long trousers and long skirts. Because fast-changing fashion in other countries is usually totally different, you would be wise not to buy clothes in your country for Egypt but to do so after you arrive. You might have heard that some women wear scarves to cover their hair, but this is not true of all Egyptian women, and it will not be expected of you.

## **Activities**

Most young people spend their free time socializing with friends in coffee shops. It is customary that in coffee shops young men, and more commonly now young women, smoke water pipes (an oriental smoking device). Shopping malls are a popular attraction for young people as well. Going to the movies is something that most young people like to do, particularly since cinemas in Egypt have become up-to-date with the latest releases from the United States and Europe. Many young people like to attend concerts and performances. A large number of cultural centers can introduce you to different form of Egyptian arts. Few young people in Egypt go to bars and clubs; it is highly uncommon. It is very common, however, for young men to spend time with their friends playing soccer. It is also customary that young women spend an evening at a friend's home socializing, but slumber parties are not very common.

## **Health Precautions**

AFS suggests that you discuss the health recommendations for Egypt, which you can get from your government or find easily on the Internet) with your doctor to determine what is best for you and your personal needs.

If you require any medical assistance during your stay, your host family or local volunteers will be ready to help find it. As an AFS participant, your medical expenses are covered for illness or injuries incurred while on the program, exclusive of pre-existing, dental or visual aid expenses.

### **Safety and Support**

Your highest risk of injury in Egypt comes from public traffic. Streets are extremely crowded in the big cities, especially in Cairo, and there seem to be no traffic rules. (In fact, rules exist but drivers and pedestrians do not follow them.) Otherwise, Egypt is a safe country. The crime rate is low compared with other Western countries. But of course, you should protect your valuables; always keep them in a safe place or carry them close to your body. In addition, it is advisable to ask your host family or AFS volunteers about local risks such as where not to be alone at night.

During your stay, local AFS volunteers will be available to assist you as you learn to live as an Egyptian. In the event of an emergency, AFS staff can be reached 24 hours a day by you in your host country and by your natural family at home.

### **Travel**

AFS's Community Service programs allow participants to travel on their own through their host countries, typically for a week or more, to explore and absorb each country's cultural diversity under very specific regulations. You must inform the AFS office of your destination, the means of transportation, the route you will take, people travelling with you, your contacts during your trip and the specific dates of your trip so that AFS can help if any problems should occur. AFS-Egypt discourages and scrutinizes independent travel, and you must sign an independent travel waiver every time you wish to travel from your local community. You must inform the office well in advance and follow the procedures. And please remember, you are not in Egypt to travel, so please prevent any interference with your work times. Also understand that you will not be insured for the time you spend travelling. Certain areas of Egypt can be visited only when escorted by police. Please check with the tourism office before starting any trips. This police escort is intended especially for the safety of tourists, so there is no need to worry

### **Documents**

You must have a passport that will be valid for six months longer than your intended stay. In addition to your passport, you also need a visa to enter and reside in your host country. Visas are obtained through the consular offices in your region and requirements often vary from consulate to consulate.

Consulates charge fees for their services, and obtaining your visa can be a complicated and lengthy process requiring a great deal of paperwork, patience and persistence. It is your responsibility to obtain your visa and pay the fees. However, AFS will let you know how to proceed and will provide you with the documents you need to apply for the visa.

### **Program Prices**

All participants are required to pay participation fee and do a mandatory fundraising. To get further information, please visit our website [www.afscanada.org](http://www.afscanada.org) or contact us.

The program price covers the following: round-trip international travel with your AFS group; travel in the host country to your host family; travel from your host family to your international departure point; AFS's medical plan; placement with your host; orientation in your home country and your host country; 24 hour emergency assistance in your home and host countries; a global medical assistance organization to support extreme emergencies; a network of trained volunteers who support you throughout your experience.

In order to keep costs low and provide good service, AFS utilizes a network of volunteers and staff in 50+ countries around the world. Volunteers need training, support and assistance from professional staff in each country. Other expenses you will normally need to pay in addition to the program price: passport and visa fees, required inoculations, expenses for eyeglasses, contacts and dental care, school uniforms (where applicable) and personal spending money. Your housing and food are provided by your host family as part of their commitment to our program.

## Country Information

### Geography and Climate

Egypt lies in North Africa, bordering Libya to the west, Sudan to the south and Israel to the north. The heart of the country is the river Nile that serves the country with water. This is why about 90% of the population lives in the narrow Nile Valley, where they are able to grow fruits and vegetables. The rest of the country is very dry desert. There are only a few oases where people live. The capital of Egypt is Cairo, one of the biggest cities of the world and home to about 19 million people, almost a quarter of the entire population.

Egypt's weather is mainly hot and dry, except in the winter months from December to February. Then it can get quite cold, and few houses have heaters. So if you will be in Egypt during these months, bring a jacket and some jumpers.

### Population

The vast majority of Egypt's inhabitants live in the Nile valley and delta, and the rest of the country (about 96% of Egypt's total land area) is sparsely populated. Most modern Egyptians are of a complex racial mixture descended from ancient Egyptians, Berbers, sub-Saharan Africans, Arabs, Greeks and Turks. Approximately 67 million people live in Egypt, and about 5% belong to the upper class.

### Language

Arabic is the official language. There is a wide difference, however, between the language spoken on the streets and classical Arabic, which is the written language and used in prayers and on the radio or news on TV. If you want to learn Arabic before you come here, learn the Egyptian dialect. In addition to Arabic, many educated Egyptians also speak English and French.

### Government

Egypt has been a republic since 1952 and is governed under the constitution of 1971. The president, who is nominated by parliament and approved by public referendum for a six-year term, holds executive power. The legislature consists of a people's assembly and an advisory council. The government must approve the formation of political parties, and those based on religion are illegal. However, the largest party, the Muslim Brotherhood, has been permitted to operate openly at times. Administratively, Egypt is divided into 26 governorates.

### Religion

About 95% of Egyptians are Sunni Muslims, and most of the rest belong to the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church. Egyptians are very much influenced by their religion. So your host family might pray five times a day, and the women in the family might wear scarves to cover their hair. Girls traditionally do not have boyfriends, but today this custom is observed mainly in rural areas, so you can find more and more girls who actually date (mainly in the big cities such as Cairo). If you are a girl, you must ask whether you will be allowed to date. In most families, a boyfriend will not be allowed into the host family's house.

Even if you are hosted by a very religious family, you will not be required to attend services on a regular basis, though you may be expected to attend a religious service at least once to have an understanding of the family's practice.

## Launching your AFS experience

Evaluations by previous participants support our belief that if you prepare prior to leaving, you will have the best experience.

Make every effort to improve your Arabic language skills before departure. Then, to familiarize yourself with life in Egypt, visit your local library or search the Internet. AFS International's website, AFS.org, provides links to websites for each participating country.

Although every participant's experience is unique, we strongly suggest that you speak with a recent AFS participant to Egypt. This person will be an excellent resource regarding living and working there. If you do not know a former participant, please contact your local AFS volunteer or AFS Interculture Canada office.

In addition, AFS will provide you with essential information about your host country to prepare you for immersion in a new and exciting culture.

Finally, Egyptians will be curious about your home community. You may be surprised how much they already know about your country's history and politics. Therefore, you will find it helpful to be informed about current events in your home community and country.

### Curiously Egyptian

- In ancient Egypt, priests plucked every hair from their bodies, including their eyebrows and eyelashes.
- Both Easter and the coming of spring are symbols of new life. The ancient Egyptians and Persians celebrated their spring festivals by colouring and eating eggs. This is because they considered the egg a symbol of fertility and new life. The Christians adopted the egg as symbolic of new life, the symbol of the Resurrection.
- "Mummy" comes from the Arabic mummiya, meaning "bitumen," a dark, waterproof substance sometimes used to coat mummies.
- We owe our calendar of 365 days to ancient Egyptians. They were the first to divide the day and night into 24 hours and to use clocks.
- Egypt is a land of many firsts: ancient Egyptians invented beer. There were more than 17 varieties. Ancient Egyptians were the first known people to fish for pleasure and to keep bees for making honey. And the earliest toilet seat in the world comes from the Egyptian city of Akhetaten, circa 1350 BC (toilets with wood, pottery and stone seats were placed above large bowls of sand).
- Egypt's first above-ground pyramid—rising 62 m. (204 ft.)—was built ca. 2630 BC for Pharaoh Djoser. Until then, pharaohs had been buried in underground tombs.
- The oldest Egyptian hieroglyphs ever found date from between 3400 and 3200 BC Do they reveal ancient religious rituals? Civil laws? Important pronouncements of pharaohs? No. They are labels from containers of cereals, oils and textiles.
- An ancient Egyptian cure for baldness was a mixture of crocodile, goose, hippopotamus, ibex, lion and snake fat.

### How to Apply?

You first have to fill out the Preliminary Application form that you can find on our website at [www.afscanada.org](http://www.afscanada.org). If you don't have access to Internet, call us at (514) 288-3282 or 1-800-361-7248 and we will send you the document by mail.

### Quick Facts

Country data	Size	1 million sq km
	Population	67 million
	Official language	Arabic
	Government	Constitutional republic
	Currency	Egyptian pound
Useful websites	<a href="http://www.egyptbot.com">www.egyptbot.com</a> <a href="http://www.sis.gov.eg">www.sis.gov.eg</a> <a href="http://www.ahram.org.eg/weekly/">www.ahram.org.eg/weekly/</a>	
AFS Egypt website	<a href="http://afsweb.afs.org/CountryP.nsf/Pages/Egypt">http://afsweb.afs.org/CountryP.nsf/Pages/Egypt</a>	