

## Silica Glass Area

The Silica Glass area is one of the mysteries of the Libyan Desert. Found within an area of not more than 80 km<sup>2</sup>, this natural glass has no equivalent in any other comparable material on earth. For this reason, it is looted to a large extent. After 70 years of scientific research, the theory of its creation from an extraterrestrial impact 28.5 million years ago (probably a meteorite that came too close to Earth) has received more general acceptance. But there are still other ideas, and a large number of questions remain.

To prehistoric man this rare material was obviously nothing but just another raw material (one among many) that he could use for his tools. So, there have been many flaking sites found. However, to a large extent, many have been spoilt over time. "Willmann's Camp", an occupation site stretching over more than 400 metres along the foot of a dune, revealed many microlithic tools made from desert glass among millions of quartzite artefacts. The radiocarbon dates range between 8,000 and 5,000 BC and thus show that the site contains remains from many occupation phases all projected onto each other by wind erosion. In spite of this challenge, detailed excavation techniques and analysis have given surprising insights into the internal structure of silica glass. However, already, shortly after the first test excavations, eager visitors have destroyed the distribution pattern of the remaining part of the settlement and hampered future study.

## Rules and Regulations:

**Respect rock art and archaeological sites. They are irreplaceable and form an important part of our cultural heritage.**

- Do not drive through archaeological sites.
- Do not collect artifacts.
- Do not wet, touch or damage prehistoric paintings or engravings.
- Report any discoveries or new findings. This is very helpful to scientists.

**Respect the environment. Flora and fauna are very fragile. Dead trees also form an important habitat for many living creatures.**

- Bring firewood from your departure point in villages and oases.
- Driving through vegetation disturbs the wildlife.
- Hunting is strictly forbidden.

**Enjoy yourself while practicing a "leave no trace" policy, which means leaving no evidence of your visit so the next person can enjoy these sites. Be careful so that nature and culture will remain and sustain.**

- Respect and follow existing trails and marks for all the sites.
- Make sure to dispose of litter properly. Burn paper litter and dispose of all glass, metal and plastic litter in the receptacle provided by your tour operator or in the oasis upon your return.
- Remember, cigarette butts are composed of cellulose acetate, a form of plastic and will pollute the environment as long as other forms of plastic.
- Collecting silica glass, pottery or anything older than 100 years old is against the law in Egypt.

*"Take only pictures, steal only time and leave only footprints."*

- Anonymous

# The Gilf Kebir National Park



Saharina



## Wadi Bakht & Magharet el Kantara

One of the principal valleys draining the eastern Gifl Kebir Plateau is the west-east oriented Wadi Bakht. Its prominent geological feature is a fossil lake bed which is considered the most important key for the climatic record of the Eastern Sahara during the past 12,000 years. The lake sediments are exposed over an area of some 65,000 m<sup>2</sup> in the upper reach of Wadi Bakht where the formation of dune barriers has successively blocked the water-courses. This deposited more than 8 metres of fine-grained still-water sediments ("playa" deposits) particularly during the humid periods of the early and middle Holocene. The temporary water pools attracted human occupation especially during that crucial phase after 5,000 BC when the Sahara started drying up again and man had to retreat to favoured localities such as the Gifl Kebir.

The rock art site Magharet el Kantara is situated about 40 km south of Wadi Bakht at the northern side of Wadi Firaq. The site gives a vivid illustration of the life of Neolithic cattle herders. After seasonal rains, these herders used the pasture in the wide plains of the Selima Sand Sheet in the south and then returned to the valleys of the Gifl Kebir. In this mountain range, places like Wadi Bakht and Wadi el Akhdar provided the necessary living condition to overcome the next dry period. The inhabitants left beautiful paintings in this rather low and not very deep shelter. Mainly, cattle and homestead scenes were depicted in different colours in an almost continuous line on the rear wall.

## Wadi Hamra & Wadi Abd el Melik

The main motivation of most of the early explorers in the Libyan Desert was to find the mythical "lost oasis of Zerzura", which was the subject of many Arab tales. After Robert Clayton had seen some wadis in the Abu Ras Plateau with green trees from an aeroplane in 1932, Lazlo Almasy believed he had discovered Zerzura. He was even more convinced after he had met an old sheikh from the Zueia of Kufra oasis, named Abd el Melik. This elder told him that after good rains he still used to pasture his camels, and occasionally also some cows, in this valley. Consequently, it was named after him.

Wadi Hamra or the "Red Valley" is so named due to its red sands. Wadi Abd el Melik and neighbouring valleys like Wadi Hamra receive considerable water from the plateau and provide groundwater storage which allows a remarkable lush growth of trees and shrubs at certain places, despite the striking aridity of the climate. The relatively dense Acacia groves, with a number of Sahelian plant and tree species such as *Maerua crassifolia* and *Balanites aegyptiaca*, resemble the typical Saharan Acacia-Panicum savannah, similar to the environment that once supported prehistoric life there. Because of the sensitivity of such a unique ecological niche, tourist camps should be arranged with great care, preferably far off the vegetated areas.

## Wadi Sura

As backdrop to the Hollywood drama "The English Patient", the "Cave of Swimmers" in Wadi Sura and their discoverer, the Hungarian Lazlo Almasy, became world famous. The main caves containing the "swimmer" like figures were discovered in 1933 along the western edge of the Abu Ras Plateau. The first rock art observed in the western Gifl Kebir were some engravings of giraffes that Patrick Clayton had found in Wadi Sura in 1931. Sadly, Hans Rhotert has already mentioned the fragile state of preservation during the Frobenius expedition in 1933 and the deterioration seems to have continued since then. The habit leaving one's name at such locations, obviously starting with British soldiers during World War II, continues with today's visitors. Although some have erased their graffiti during later visits, the damage caused cannot be undone.

A few years ago, during a trip about 10 km west of the "Cave of Swimmers", a second cave that is extremely rich in paintings and shows several features never seen before was discovered. Besides hundreds of handprints, about 20 strange, unidentifiable animals, crowds of dancing people and persons in swimming posture also appear. Most noteworthy, not one domestic animal is to be found among the hundreds of figures, which underlines the extraordinary character of this site. The liveliness and density of these drawings is without compare all over the Sahara.

