



THREE PEAKS EGYPT CHALLENGE

TRAIL GUIDE

This is the official trail guide of the THREE PEAKS EGYPT CHALLENGE. It is a complete description of the 38km trail, including route directions and background information on sites of cultural, historical and environmental interest. Use it in conjunction with the official Three Peaks Egypt Challenge map, GPS track and GPS information sheet, all of which can be downloaded at the website www.threepeaksegypt.org.

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- 1 Start at the co-op gas station, in the centre of town (GPS 1). Walk 150m SW on the road to a small football pitch. Turn right, following the road as it runs uphill and bends left. Continue straight on the road, heading SW.
- 2 After 300m, the main tarmac bends sharply left. Exit before this bend on a dirt track, which runs ahead between Bedouin houses.
- 3 Move between these Bedouin houses to exit on a rocky hillside.
- 4 A clear trail, with foundations, zigzags up this hillside. Follow it up to a narrow pass in the rocks: this is Naqb el Talla (GPS 2). It has good views over St Katherine. Mt Sinai is also visible to the SE.
- 5 Follow the path as it zigzags down the other side of Naqb el Talla. It makes a gradual descent along the side of Wadi el Talla, running N. Views soon open of a monastery building in the wadi below: this is Deir Rahab.
- 6 The path enters the bottom of Wadi Talla opposite Deir Rahab. Follow it N alongside the outer wall of the monastery's large garden.

Deir Rahab – 'The Monk's Monastery' – is a small monastery in Wadi el Talla, also known as the Monastery of Cosmas and Damianos. It stands amidst cypress trees and olive groves and was built to commemorate two Christian brothers who practised medicine in 3rd century Syria, treating the needy and, according to some, performing the world's first leg transplant. They were martyred for their faith under Roman rule.

- 7 Continue N on the path. It runs alongside the monastery garden at first, before moving further out onto the rocky wadi side.
- 8 After 400m the path leads from the wadi side to the wadi bottom, entering a gravelly area between the ends of two large gardens (GPS 3).
- 9 20-30m ahead from here, two small paths diverge at a fork. One runs higher on the wadi side; one runs lower, alongside the wall of the next garden.
- 10 Take the lower path, alongside the garden.
- 11 The path passes a cluster of palms in the end of this garden. Continue from here as it runs around a large drop in the wadi to the left.
- 12 200m after the cluster of palms, the path bends sharply right.
- 13 It takes a SE line now, running up into a smaller wadi: Wadi Quweiz. A stone hut is visible on the top of a low pass at the end of this wadi. This gives a possible early exit route back to St Katherine (30 mins).
- 14 Continue SE on the main path until you reach a fork (GPS 4): one branch of the path begins to zigzag up ahead, going SE to the low pass. The other branch cuts down to the wadi bottom, doubling back to the NW.
- 15 Take the path to the wadi bottom. This soon leads between two gardens.
- 16 The path continues to rise NW, with views opening over a new wadi: this is Wadi Tlah. Continue along it, on the main path.
17. A fork in the path is soon reached, to the left of a huge boulder in a walled enclosure (GPS 5). The higher path on the left goes to the Chapel of St John Klimakos, which is not in view from here. Take the other, lower path on the right, following it along Wadi Tlah to the NW.
- 18 Further along, views open to the chapel, high on the left side of the wadi.

St John Klimakos was one of the Sinai's early Christian hermits. He entered the Monastery of St Katherine as a monk around 600AD, before leaving to live in Wadi Tlah. He spent 40 years in a hermit cell here, later writing *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*: a sort of hermit's handbook for early Christians in the Sinai, which became a classic of religious literature. The chapel in Wadi Tlah marks the spot he lived.

NAVIGATION ON THE THREE PEAKS

This trail guide should be used in conjunction with the official trail map/ GPS track.

Distances are approximate.

Compass bearings are abbreviated – e.g. N, S SW, etc – and are approximate. It

is chiefly a planning resource/ companion to enrich the hiking experience.

Bedouin guides should be responsible for your navigation. Remember, mountain hiking can be hazardous. Three Peaks Egypt Challenge bears no responsibility for any loss or injury sustained as a result of information in this guide.

- 19 Around 500m further on, the path passes to the right of a water tank. Just after this, it passes to the right of stone hut with a palm frond roof, before leading between the low walls of two gardens.
- 20 Continue on the main path from here, going N along the bank of Wadi Tlah.
- 21 After 250m it drops from the wadi side to the wadi bottom, entering a bouldery section.
- 22 The path is hard to follow here. There are different ways through. You can take any. After roughly 100m, look for a path on the left side of the wadi. This allows you to exit the bouldery section and leads along the side of the wadi more easily, towards a garden with a single palm tree inside its wall.
- 23 Continue as the path runs to the left of this garden.
- 24 After 150m it passes to the right of a small stone hut.
- 25 The path passes to the left of several more gardens. After 500m you reach the garden of Dr Ahmed Mansour. Look out for a drinking spring to the left of the path here (GPS 6). You can re-fill bottles from the tap.

Dr Ahmed Mansour is one of the Sinai's most highly respected herbal doctors. He has an extensive knowledge of the Sinai's plants and their medicinal uses, gained through a lifetime of study and experiment. He lives in Wadi Tlah, where he has a small school for teaching people about his work. Traditional Bedouin knowledge about medicinal plants is being lost as Western medicine becomes ever more prevalent and a course with Dr Ahmed is one way to help preserve it. The more people who want to learn, the greater the value of this knowledge and its chances of preservation will be.

- 26 Follow the path NW from the drinking spring. Less than 200m ahead, there is a small, ruined stone building on the left side of the path. This marks the point the path begins a gradual descent to the bottom stretch of Wadi Tlah. Follow it to the bottom and continue along, moving to the NW.
- 27 After 300m you will see the mouth of a narrow, rocky wadi on the right. This is called El Bugiyya and it leads up to the village of Abu Seila, giving another possible exit route (30-45 mins). A path runs parallel with the wadi bottom on its high, northerly banks, giving the easiest walking option.
- 28 Continue NW in Wadi Tlah. After 450m, before a carob tree and a large cluster of palms, a small path leads out on the wadi bank to the left, rising towards a small stone room.
- 29 Take this path, but don't follow it all the way to the stone room. Stick to its lower branch, which runs alongside a garden wall, bending left to bring you into the mouth of a new wadi. You enter this wadi by two palm trees: one tall, one short. This is Wadi Shagg, the next major wadi on the route (GPS 7).
- 30 Follow a trail along the left side of Wadi Shagg, passing a small dam whose reservoir is now full of silt.
- 31 After 100m, near the end of a garden on the right, a trail cuts out on the rocky left side of the wadi. Follow this along the wadi bank, until it descends to the wadi bottom again, roughly 100m ahead. Continue ahead here, moving between large boulders. There are no paths.
- 32 After 150m, look for a rough path that exits on the left, leading SW up the side of Wadi Shagg.
- 33 Take this path and follow it until it joins a better path high on the wadi side, near a black dike. Continue on until this drops to the wadi bottom again, entering by a small garden with a high wall.
- 34 Continue up the wadi bottom now. Further up, the path runs over a boulder, as a flight of cemented steps.
- 35 Towards the end of the wadi, the path zigzags up a steep section before levelling out below a series of small waterfall cliffs in smooth, red granite. The top of a palm tree is visible above them.
- 36 Follow a path up rocky terrain to the right of these waterfall cliffs – do not ascend the cliffs direct.
- 37 This brings you out above the high palm tree. You can look to the left to see a waterpool in the rocks below here. This is Kharazet el Shagg (GPS 8). The water isn't used for drinking, but you can bathe.

The Bedouin of the Sinai have a rich topographical vocabulary, which allows them to distinguish between many subtle features of the landscape. Water sources are just one feature with many distinctions. For the Bedouin near St Katherine, a *kharaza* is a pool, usually in an impermeable hollow, which catches rain and surface run off. A *galt* is a deeper pool, fed by subsurface trickles that keep it full throughout the year. An *ein* is usually a trickle of water from a cliff, that collects in a small man made pool. A *bir* is a well and a *themila* is a shallow hole or well you can dig to reach groundwater.

- 38 From the palm tree, the path drops to the bottom of a new wadi: this is Wadi Tinya. Follow it along as it bends sharply left. It is rough and bouldery; the easiest route is on the left side of the wadi.
- 39 Further ahead, move to the right side of the wadi, passing between the wall of a garden and a higher cliff on the right side. There is a drinking spring in the cliffs here (GPS 9).
- 40 Continue 150m ahead. You will soon reach an area where several ruined garden walls stand (GPS 10). Move between these and exit Wadi Tinya, entering a small wadi on the right: this is Wadi Sagr.
- 41 Take a small path up the right bank of Wadi Sagr. This bypasses a small dam in the wadi bottom, whose reservoir is now silted up. Continue along Wadi Sagr after this, moving SW.
- 42 A small, rough trail is visible in the wadi at points: follow this until it brings you round to the entrance of a narrow canyon in the cliffs. This is the Wadi Sagr Canyon (GPS 11).
- 43 Scramble up a low, rocky wall to enter the canyon. A short way in, at the bottom of the cliffs on the left, next to a small tree, is a drinking spring. You can drink from this using the tin can provided. Do not re-fill bottles as it takes several hours for the spring to re-fill for the next hikers.
- 44 Continue to the end of the canyon and scramble up a rocky section to exit.

45 After scrambling up this rocky section, you will enter a small, narrow wadi, that drains into the canyon. Follow this into a more open landscape of low, rocky outcrops. There are no obvious trails here. Exit the small wadi left and move S, aiming for the highest rocky ground in the distance ahead; after less than 500m you will reach a bigger, more open wadi by a walled enclosure: this is Wadi Abu Tuweita (GPS 12).

46 Turn left and follow a faint trail SE along the wadi.

47 Directly ahead, in the distance, you can see the high, smooth cliffs of the Jebel Abbas Basha massif.

48 After 450m the trail runs into a more rocky area at the end of the wadi. It takes a sharp left turn, before rising up to the small pass of Naqb Abu Tuweita (GPS 13). The trail is hard to spot through this rocky section so look out for the small stone trail markers – these are called *rojoms* – which show the way.

49 Follow a rough camel path down from the pass, heading SE. Views open over Wadi Tinya here. This is the upper stretch of the *same* Wadi Tinya the trail was in before it entered Wadi Sagr.

50 The path enters the bottom of Wadi Tinya near a cluster of stone huts (GPS 14). Immediately after passing these huts, it runs down to the very bottom stretch of Wadi Tinya, entering near several old walled gardens.

51 After 100m in this bottom stretch the trail zigzags out on the left bank of the wadi.

52 Follow the trail as it continues along the high left bank of the wadi, moving SE.

53 Less than 450m ahead the trail descends to the wadi bottom again. It crosses the wadi here, before zigzagging out on the right bank. This section can be hard to follow so look carefully.

54 Follow the trail along the right bank of the wadi now, passing several gardens. It soon zigzags to the top of a major pass ahead: this is Sharafa Sakikriya (GPS 15). Views open S to Jebel Katherina.

55 The path runs NE from Sharafa Sakikriya, zigzagging up the side of Jebel Abbas Basha. The summit is marked by a large Ottoman palace and the official high point is a cairn, inside the palace walls (GPS 16).

Jebel Abbas Basha takes its name from an Ottoman Viceroy, who ruled Egypt in the middle of the 19th century. He was a chronic sufferer of tuberculosis and wanted a mountain palace with clean air to aid his recovery. He originally intended to build it on Mount Sinai, swapping it to this peak only when local monks told him the air was cleaner here (a story invented to protect their holy mountain). In the end, he died before the palace was finished; some say he was murdered by a servant having an affair with one of his wives. Construction stopped where it started and you can still enter the palace today.

56 Follow the same path back down to Sharafa Sakikriya.

57 From Sharafa Sakikriya, follow a big, clear path S. This runs down a long wadi, called Wadi Zawatin.

58 After 1km, the path runs to the left side of a Bedouin garden, with a cluster of olive trees in the end.

59 Further down, the path runs above/ to the left of another Bedouin garden. A small bamboo hut – which is a composting toilet – stands outside this garden. The garden belongs to Hussein Abu Tarawa and it's one that offers accommodation: there's a room for shelter, a well etc.

60 Follow the path down Wadi Zawatin as it runs above/ to the left of more Bedouin gardens.

61 Further down, it drops to the wadi bottom, then passes to the right of a small, roofed shelter. This belongs to Umm Saad, a Bedouin woman who also owns a garden in Wadi Zawatin, offering more accommodation.

62 Continue S on a good path from here, going down Wadi Zawatin.

Wadi Zawatin means Wadi of the Olives, after its ancient groves of olive trees. Today, it's a major hub of Bedouin gardens, which grow everything from olives to apples, apricots, almonds and pomegranates, plus vegetables and herbs. Early Christian settlers developed gardens like this in Byzantine times: gradually, over the centuries, they became integral to the local Bedouin culture too, as sources of wealth and food. Over 400 of these gardens once thrived in the high mountains: today, due to the dawn of urban living and intense competition from other markets, only 10% are still active.

63 After 500m you reach the end of Wadi Zawatin: this area is called El Kheded (GPS 17). The main path bends left, heading NE into a narrow, rocky wadi: this is Wadi Tubug. This path continues down Wadi Tubug, then zigzags over the pass of Abu Jeefa to St Katherine (60-90 mins). It's another possible exit route.

64 Do not take Wadi Tubug. Continue straight ahead to the S, following a small path uphill towards Jebel Katherina in the distance. This soon brings you to the top of a low pass (GPS 18).

65 Follow a faint trail ahead from this pass, going SE along a new wadi: Wadi Matthar.

66 After 200m, down a small wadi on the left, you'll see a stone hut. Just beyond it you can see the tops of some trees in a garden. This is the garden of Oda Mohammed, which offers another place to stay. It has a composting toilet, a well and several shelters for hikers.

67 Continue on the trail in Wadi Matthar from here, passing through several ruined walls.

68 The trail continues S in Wadi Matthar, passing several gardens. Around 600m ahead you will reach a large tree outside a garden wall, surrounded by a ring of stones (GPS 19). This is a mulberry tree.

Mulberry trees are not native to the Sinai but they nevertheless have a long history in the peninsula. Bedouin oral tradition tells us Christian settlers began to plant them in early Byzantine times, along with exotic trees of many other kinds. There are only a handful of mulberry trees in the Sinai today – most of them in the mountains around St Katherine – and they're something of an oddity, with most being planted outside gardens. These are communal fruits for all mountain wayfarers and they have a special place in the hearts of local people. The trees are even protected by their own Bedouin law.

69 This mulberry tree is a key turn off point. Leave the main trail now, which continues along Wadi Matthar. Take a smaller, fainter trail to the left, which begins by running SE through a low, ruined line of stones. From here it continues to a gap in rocky outcrops less than 100m ahead.

70 After passing through this gap, you will see the rocky mouth of Wadi el Ahmar directly opposite (GPS 20).

71 Wadi el Ahmar does not have footpaths. Small piles of trail-marking stones – ‘rojoms’ – mark the way.

72 After entering Wadi el Ahmar, scramble out on the rocky, left bank, following the trail-marking rojoms. Over on the opposite bank, in this early stretch of the wadi, you will see the stone foundations of an older path.

73 After 150m a small wadi runs out on the right. Do not follow this – continue left in Wadi el Ahmar.

74 After another 150m you will reach a ruined stone building below a smooth cliff.

75 Scramble up this cliff from the ruin, edging along a smooth ledge.

76 Continue in Wadi el Ahmar, following the rojoms, sometimes scrambling out on the rocky left, bank.

77 The wadi soon stops twisting and enters a straight stretch, rising to a high pass, where a huge boulder is wedged in the bottom. Take a path out on the right in the first part of this straight stretch (GPS 21).

78 Follow this path S up the steep, rocky side of the wadi. This leads up to a high basin.

79 Walk 150m SE across this basin, to where a small, rocky wadi drains into it from the E (GPS 22).

80 Turn left into this small, rocky wadi, following it uphill to the E, scrambling in places.

81 After 200m you will emerge in another basin, smaller than the last. Follow the trail-marking rojoms, crossing this basin, then veering right, moving S in rocky terrain. After 150m there is a small, fenced enclosure.

82 Looking SE from this enclosure, you can see a gap in the smooth, red crags; through it, higher crags are visible in the distance. These crags have a darker colour and are part of Jebel Katherina. Move towards this gap, where you will enter a flat pass/ passageway between the crags (GPS 23).

83 This rocky pass/ passageway brings you to a larger wadi: Wadi Umm Silla. Directly opposite, to the SE, you will see a narrow, rocky gorge in black rocks, through which Wadi Umm Silla drains the northern face of Jebel Katherina. Turn left now and follow a faint trail uphill, going NE through red outcrops.

84 The trail zigzags uphill, becoming easier to follow as it gets higher. This soon brings you to the pass of Farsh Umm Silla (GPS 24). Views open E here to Mount Sinai.

85 Walk S from Farsh Umm Silla, following the main trail. This soon begins a series of zigzags up the north face of Jebel Katherina, whose summit chapel is visible most of the way.

86 Jebel Katherina is the collective name for a cluster of high peaks. The first peak on the right is the one with the chapel on top (GPS 25). Ascend this peak, following a good, stone paved path to the top.

87 You will see another peak 400m S – this is slightly higher, but it is not part of the Three Peaks Challenge.

Jebel Katherina is one of Egypt's most iconic peaks and is named after St Katherine, who was martyred by the Romans in 4th century Alexandria. Legend has it her body was carried to the Sinai by angels, then laid to rest on the summit, where a chapel stands in her memory today. Her bones were apparently found by a group of monks in the 9th century, who took them down to the monastery, which only subsequently became known as the Monastery of St Katherine. They are still stored in a sarcophagus in the monastery today and Orthodox visitors are allowed to view them in a ceremony every morning.

88 Go back down to Farsh Umm Silla the same way. Follow a good path E, which zigzags down into Wadi Shagg Musa. Mount Sinai – the last peak – is in full view ahead. Behind it on the right is Jebel Umm Alawi.

89 After 1km a minor path exits the main trail to the right, crossing a small footbridge to Ein Shanar (GPS 26). This is a small spring at the bottom of a cliff where you can get water. It's fed by a slow drip and it can take a long time to replenish so don't fill bottles. Just quench your thirst using the tin can.

90 Continue down the main zigzag path in Wadi Shagg Musa. This ends by the Bedouin garden of Ramadan Abu Musa. Water is available here, plus shelter. It is another accommodation hub. Nearby is a building in a bigger garden, with huge olive groves: this is Deir el Arbain or The Monastery of the Forty Martyrs.

Deir el Arbain is one of the Sinai's most ancient monasteries; almost as old as the Monastery of St Katherine itself. It stands in the midst of some of the region's biggest olive groves and is named after the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, a group of Roman soldiers who were killed for professing Christianity. In the past, this was considered a holy spot by the Bedouin of the Sinai; they said mountain spirits used to hold divine revel by night and that the grounds had healing properties for people with any sickness. Today it's a place of quiet contemplation for local monks.

91 Continue on the main path past Ramadan's garden, as it runs between the end-walls of two large gardens. Deir el Arbain – The Monastery of the Forty Martyrs – is in the left garden.

92 There is a possible exit route to the left here, along Wadi el Arbain. A trail runs N in the wadi, directly alongside the wall of Deir el Arbain and its garden, back to St Katherine (45-60 mins).

93 Continue straight ahead from this gap, joining a bigger, better path directly ahead.

94 This is a major camel path that rises E to a pass below the south face of Mount Sinai (GPS 27).

95 Continue NE from this pass, following the path as it leads uphill, around the E side of Mount Sinai. Further along, this connects to the main tourist path – the so-called 'camel path' – up Mount Sinai (GPS 28). For an early exit, it is possible to follow this path down to the Monastery of St Katherine.

96 However, continue uphill on the main path. Further up, it runs through a narrow cutting in the rocks.
97 Turn left after this cutting and continue on the main path. This leads to a start of flight of steps – the higher half of the Steps of Repentance – which wind all the way to Mount Sinai’s summit (GPS 29).

Mount Sinai is the holiest peak in the Sinai; perhaps even one of the holiest peaks in the world. Jews, Christians and Muslims believe God spoke with Moses here and a small chapel and mosque stand on the summit today. The chapel is closed but the mosque is usually kept open and below it is a small cave where it’s said Moses sheltered. However, this particular summit has not always been regarded as the spot where it truly happened: early Christians regarded Jebel Serbal – a peak 60km away – as the true Mount Sinai of The Bible. Others say it was a summit in North Sinai.

98 Go back down the steps, following the main path N, past the narrow cutting through which you first came. This leads down to the basin of Farsh Eliyas, where there is a stone courtyard.

99 On the N side of this courtyard, just outside its wall, is Bir Eliyas: a well of drinking water (GPS 30). This is a good spot for re-filling bottles with water, which you can pull up in a bucket.

100 Continue on the main path, which runs to the right of a small dam, before passing through a stone archway (GPS 31). This arch is the Gate of Elijah and it marks the top of the lower flight of the Steps of Repentance.

101 After less than 250m you will reach a second stone archway: the Gate of Forgiveness.

102 After 100m you will pass to the left of a small chapel: the Chapel of the Virgin of the Economos.

103 Continue down the steps from here until you reach the Monastery of St Katherine (GPS 32). The challenge ends outside the main entrance to the monastery on its NE side.

The Monastery of St Katherine marks the end of the Three Peaks Egypt Challenge; just as it has marked the end of countless other journeys in the Sinai throughout the last 1500 years. The Emperor Justinian ordered its construction in the 6th century as a place of refuge for the Sinai’s early Christians. It has stood here, operating continuously since then, and is now home to around 20 monks who live much like their predecessors. It houses some of Christianity’s most revered holy sites and it is open 8.45am-11.30am daily, except Sundays. Fridays only 10.45am-11.30am. It also has a guesthouse where you can stay.