

REPORT

EGYPTIAN TOURISM AND CRUISE SHIPS: EFFORTS YET TO BEAR FRUIT



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Air travel remains virtually the only means by which international tourists reach Egypt's tourism destinations. Official statistics confirm this reality while underscoring the limited diversity of Egypt's international tourism connectivity. In 2024, Egypt welcomed a total of 15.78 million international tourists. Of these, 94.5%, or 14.92 million passengers, arrived via the country's airports, while only 4.7% entered through Egypt's land borders, representing fewer than 737,000 visitors. By contrast, Egypt's seaports along its Mediterranean and Red Sea coasts played an almost negligible role in inbound tourism. In the same year, they accounted for just 0.8% of international arrivals – less than one percent – equivalent to approximately 127,000 foreign visitors.

The modest number of tourists entering Egypt through its land borders is understandable, given that the country is surrounded by states that are not major tourism-generating markets. More striking, however, is the near absence of the Mediterranean and Red Seas as gateways for inbound tourism, unlike the prominent role played by Egypt's airports. Across both bodies of water lie dozens of tourism-generating countries, while maritime tourism traffic – particularly cruise ships – is highly active. Cruise tourism has become one of the fastest-growing segments of the global tourism industry.

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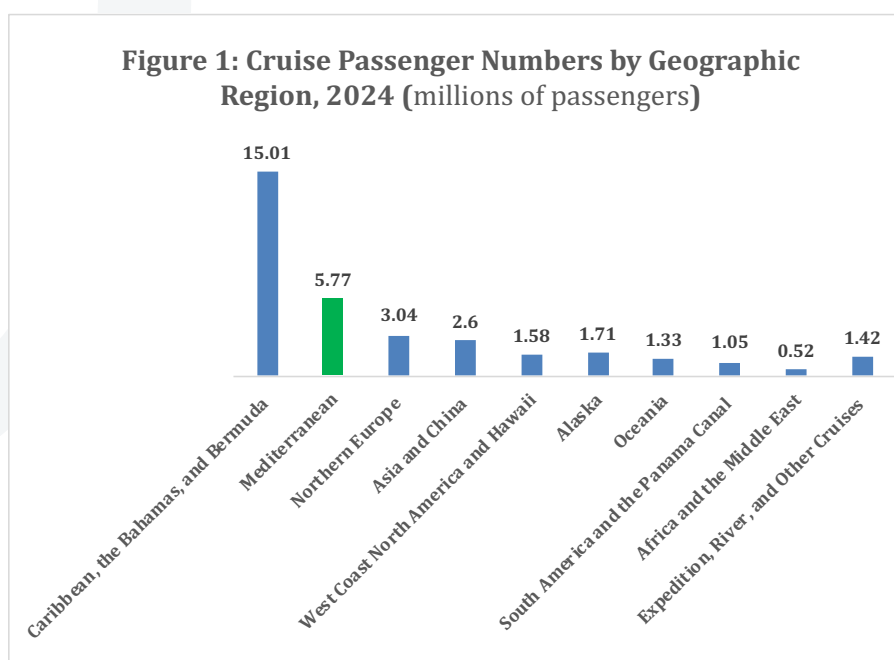
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First:

Importance and Benefits

In 2024, approximately 34.6 million passengers traveled aboard cruise ships worldwide. Collectively, they spent the equivalent of 232 million passenger-days on leisure cruises, contributing to global tourism revenues estimated at \$198.8 billion. Fifty-five percent of these travelers chose cruise itineraries operating within two principal geographic regions. The first encompassed the Caribbean, Bermuda, and the Bahamas, where cruise fleets carried approximately 15 million passengers, representing 43% of all cruise passengers worldwide and generating an estimated 106.57 million passenger-days.

The Mediterranean ranked second among global cruise destinations, welcoming 5.77 million passengers, or 13% of the worldwide cruise market, while generating approximately 34 million passenger-days. Other geographic regions attracted smaller shares of global cruise passengers, as illustrated in Figure 1.



Source: State of the Cruise Industry 2026 report, published by the Cruise Lines International Association
<https://cruising.org/sites/default/files/20262026%20/04-State%20of%20the%20Cruise%20Industry%20Presentation.pdf>

The Mediterranean's position as one of the world's leading cruise destinations is underpinned by a network of 160 ports spread across the Mediterranean Basin, the Adriatic Sea, and the Black Sea. In 2024, these ports collectively received more than 15,800 cruise ship calls , recording 36 million passenger movements. Reports further indicate that 9.9 million of these passengers chose to disembark and visit the cities and tourist attractions located near their ports of call. These shore excursions, which typically lasted no more than a single day, generated substantial tourism activity for the host destinations.

The figures above have translated into significant economic gains for several Southern European countries bordering the Mediterranean, most notably:

1. Italy

In 2024, Italian ports received 3,365 cruise ship calls, carrying a total of 9.7 million passengers. Collectively, these passengers accounted for 27% of all cruise passengers traveling in the Mediterranean during the year. The majority of cruise itineraries included calls at historic port cities such as Civitavecchia, the principal gateway to Rome, as well as Genoa, Savona, Palermo, and Livorno (see Table 2).

Figure 2: Italy's Leading Cruise Ports/Cities by Cruise Calls and Total Transit Passengers, 2024

Port/City	Number of Cruise Calls	Number of Passengers (thousands)
Civitavecchia	Not specified	3,500
Genoa and Savona	440	2,284
Palermo (Sicily)	299	985
Livorno	457	905

Source: Medcruise statistics report 2024, The Association of Mediterranean Cruise Ports, April 2025.

Cruise tourism generated €18.1 billion in direct and indirect economic activity in Italy, contributing approximately 8.8% of the country's total annual tourism receipts, which were estimated at €206.4 billion in 2023, according to the latest statistical statement issued by the Italian government.

The sector also supported approximately 113,000 jobs. Of these, 9,000 were directly associated with cruise ship operations, while the remaining 104,000 were generated by supporting services provided to cruise operators, passengers, and crews. These included the provisioning and delivery of supplies, ship maintenance and repair, tourism services and organized excursions at ports of call, as well as hotel and restaurant services.

Statistics further indicate that approximately 26% of cruise passengers choose to disembark and visit renowned tourism destinations, such as those served by Italy's cruise ports. Some passengers also begin or end their voyages at these ports, encouraging them to spend at least one overnight stay in the port city rather than limiting their visit to a brief shore excursion. This results in additional tourism spending and greater economic returns for the host destination.

2. Turkey

Turkey is among the most active cruise destinations in the eastern Mediterranean. In 2024, its ports received a total of 872 cruise ship calls, carrying more than 1.4 million passengers – equivalent to 3.9% of all cruise passengers traveling in the Mediterranean that year. These vessels called at six Turkish ports (see Table 3), most notably Kuşadası and Bodrum on the Aegean Sea, and Istanbul on the Sea of Marmara.

Table 3: Turkish Cruise Ports and Cities Visited by Cruise Ships, Number of Cruise Calls, and Total Transit Passengers, 2024

Port/City	Number of Cruise Calls	Number of Passengers (thousands)
Kuşadası and Bodrum	620	939
Istanbul	164	403
Çeşme	73	54
Alanya	15	20

Source: Medcruise statistics report 2024, The Association of Mediterranean Cruise Ports, April 2025.

Approximately 15% of cruise passengers arriving at Turkish ports chose to disembark for tourism purposes in 2024, contributing to tourism activity not only in the port cities themselves but also in nearby destinations. This was particularly evident in Istanbul, which welcomed 18.6 million international tourists during the year, and Izmir, located near the port of Çeşme, which received approximately 1.6 million international tourists during the first ten months of 2024.

In 2024, Turkey generated approximately \$3 billion in revenue from cruise tourism activities. However, this substantial figure represents only the beginning of the country's long-term ambitions to expand its cruise tourism sector. The Turkish government has already announced plans to increase annual international tourist arrivals to 70 million by 2028, representing a 30% increase over 2023, the year in which the target was announced. In that year, Turkey welcomed 49.2 million international tourists.

Among the initiatives announced to support this objective are major investments in cruise port infrastructure. These include the redevelopment of Istanbul's historic Galataport into a dedicated cruise terminal with an annual capacity of approximately 1,095 cruise ship calls carrying 5.5 million passengers, as well as the construction of the Fethiye Cruise Port in Muğla Province on the Aegean Sea. Upon its completion in 2030, the new port is expected to accommodate 100 cruise ships carrying approximately 120,000 passengers annually. Together, these projects are expected to help Turkey achieve its objective of receiving 2,000 cruise ship calls annually by 2028.

Second:

Domestic Advantages

In 2024, Egyptian ports received only 29 cruise ship calls, carrying a total of 29,297 passengers. This represented just 0.081% of all cruise passengers recorded at Mediterranean ports during the year. This limited level of cruise activity cannot be attributed to a lack of tourism assets or operational capacity. On the contrary, Egypt possesses the infrastructure and legislative framework needed to support its ambition of welcoming hundreds of cruise ships annually, carrying hundreds of thousands of passengers, many of whom would be expected to disembark and visit the country's renowned tourist attractions. These domestic strengths can be grouped into three main categories:

1. Cruise Terminals

Egypt has a total of 55 commercial and specialized ports along its Mediterranean and Red Sea coastlines. Of these, six ports are equipped to receive cruise ships, with facilities that include passenger terminals, passport and immigration services, baggage inspection, quarantine facilities, and other essential infrastructure. In addition, ports such as Sharm El-Sheikh and Ain Sokhna periodically accommodate cruise ships through special operational arrangements pending the construction of dedicated passenger terminals, each with a planned annual capacity of 1.5 million passengers.

2. Tourist and Heritage Sites

Most of Egypt's cruise ports are located in or near prominent cities, resorts, and tourist and heritage destinations (see Map). This geographic advantage enhances their attractiveness to cruise operators by enabling

passengers to undertake shore excursions to nearby attractions. The most notable destinations include:

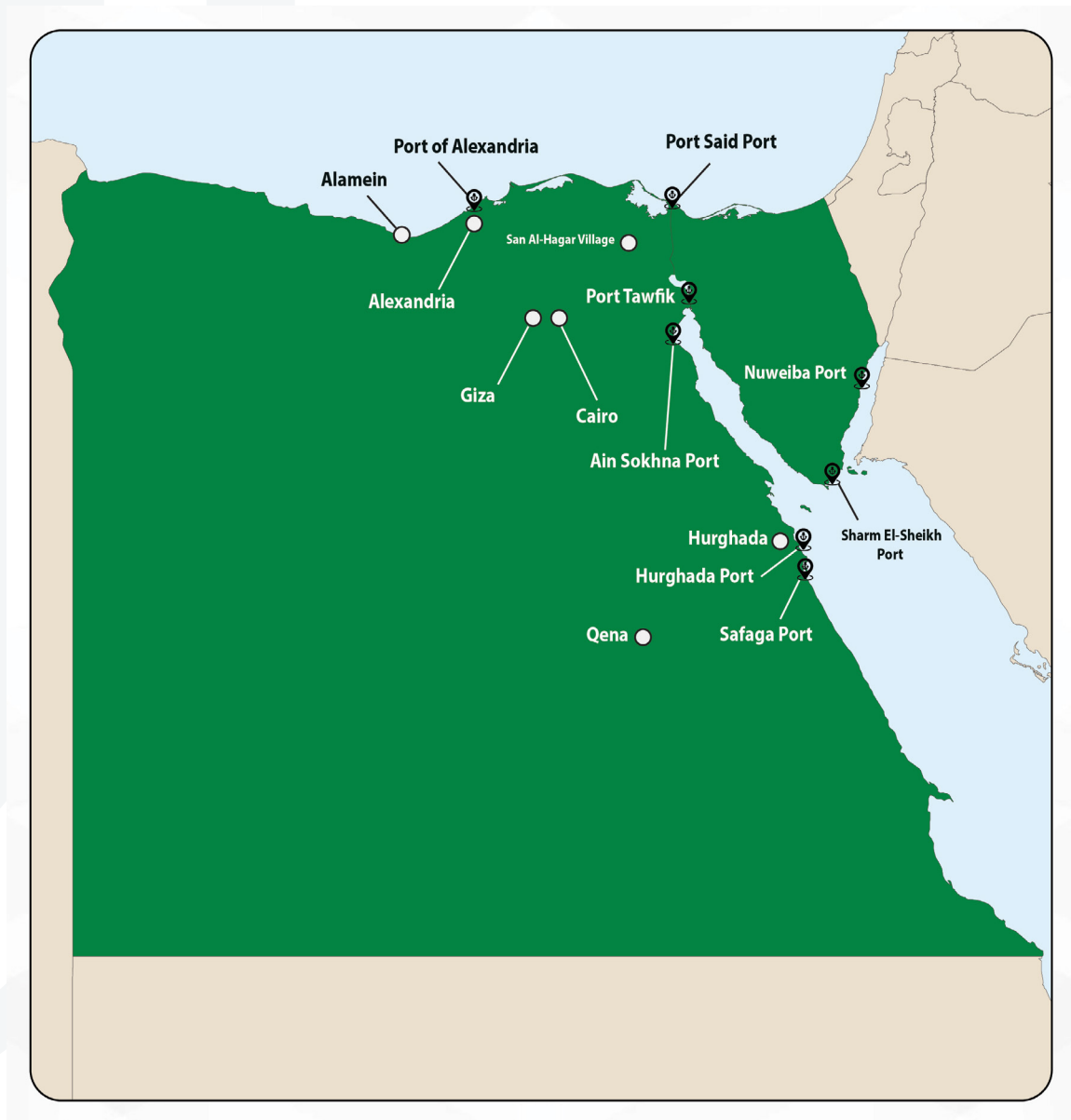
The most notable tourist and heritage destinations include:

- Alexandria (adjacent to the Port of Alexandria): One of the oldest and most renowned cities in the Mediterranean, Alexandria is home to dozens of heritage sites, archaeological and art museums, including one UNESCO World Heritage Site. The city also boasts high-end tourism infrastructure and hospitality facilities.
- Alamein (110 km from the Port of Alexandria): A newly developed coastal city distinguished by its crystal-clear waters and modern urban landscape. It is internationally recognized for its World War II heritage, having been the site of the Battles of Alamein, which marked a decisive turning point in favor of the Allied forces.
- Giza (210 km from the Port of Alexandria): Best known as the home of the Pyramids of Giza, the last surviving Wonder of the Ancient World, Giza also hosts the Grand Egyptian Museum. The governorate continues to attract international attention through a succession of exceptional archaeological discoveries.
- Cairo (130 km from Port Tawfik): Egypt's capital and the «city that never sleeps,» Cairo is itself inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List for its outstanding historic urban fabric and rich religious heritage. Combined with its vibrant, around-the-clock atmosphere, these attributes encourage visitors to extend their stay and experience the city beyond a brief visit.
- San Al-Hagar (72 km from West Port Said): One of Egypt's largest archaeological sites, covering approximately 7 square kilometers. Dating to the period preceding the Third Intermediate Period of ancient Egyptian history, it served as the capital of Egypt during the Twenty-first Dynasty.
- Hurghada (adjacent to Hurghada Port): Egypt's leading Red Sea resort destination, Hurghada is home to numerous high-end hotels and tourism facilities, in addition to the Hurghada Museum. The surrounding waters

feature an extensive network of coral reefs and historic shipwrecks, making the city a premier destination for snorkeling, scuba diving, and recreational fishing.

- Qena (170 km from Safaga Port): Home to the internationally renowned Dendera Temple Complex, as well as the mosque and shrine of the prominent Islamic scholar Abdel Rahim Al-Qenawi.

Map: Major Nearby Cities, Tourist Attractions, and Heritage Sites in the Vicinity of Egypt's Cruise Ports



Source: Compiled by the researcher based on various sources

3. Supply Chain Capabilities

Over several decades, Egypt's maritime sector has developed the expertise and operational capabilities needed to meet the requirements of cruise ships across a wide range of maritime services. Egyptian port authorities, together with the Suez Canal Authority (SCA), provide essential services, including towage, pilotage, firefighting, pollution control, emergency medical evacuation, and sanitation and disinfection services. In addition, Egyptian shipyards – notably the Port Said Shipyard – offer routine and emergency maintenance and repair, as well as salvage and underwater repair services.

Dozens of Egyptian companies from both the public and private sectors are also capable of supplying cruise vessels with fuel, potable water, provisions, and housekeeping and onboard maintenance services. Egyptian shipping agents possess extensive experience in handling all administrative and operational procedures associated with cruise ships calling at Egyptian ports. They also play a central coordinating role among the various stakeholders involved in cruise operations, including government agencies, tourism companies, suppliers, and other service providers.

Egypt's cruise supply chains are further strengthened by a broad production base comprising agricultural enterprises and food-processing companies distributed across the country, all capable of supplying cruise vessels with high-quality fresh produce. They are complemented by a well-established industrial sector capable of meeting cruise ships' requirements for both consumable and durable goods. Collectively, these capabilities position Egypt to maximize the indirect economic benefits generated through cruise supply chains, which account for an average of 32% of the global economic contribution of the cruise industry.

4. The Legal Framework

Over the past several years, the relevant authorities have introduced a series of legislative and regulatory measures aimed at enhancing the attractiveness of Egyptian ports to cruise ships. Among the most significant was Cabinet Decision No. 124 of 2023, which established a range of facilitations for cruise vessels calling at Egyptian ports, including:

- Requiring that foreign cruise ships calling at Egyptian seaports be billed in U.S. dollars, thereby simplifying financial transactions between the Egyptian government and cruise operators.
- Maintaining the 75% reduction in port dues applicable to cruise ships under Law No. 24 of 1983.
- Granting an additional 50% discount on tugboat and mooring services.
- Providing a further 50% reduction on charges for the use of fixed and floating facilities operated by Egyptian port authorities and the Egyptian Maritime Safety Authority.
- Exempting cruise ships from overtime service charges for procedures conducted outside official working hours or during public holidays.
- Permitting Egyptian harbor pilots, when required for navigational safety, to accompany foreign cruise ships from designated foreign ports to Egyptian ports.
- Prohibiting the collection of any fees or charges for services that are not actually provided.
- Authorizing shipping agents representing cruise vessels to coordinate vessel arrival and departure procedures in accordance with the relevant laws and regulations.
- Requiring port authorities and all providers of services and supplies to cruise ships to publicly disclose the services they offer, their specifications, and their comprehensive pricing to ensure transparency and prevent ambiguity.
- Requiring port authorities to provide a range of logistical services for visiting cruise ships, including information offices, passenger waiting lounges, shuttle buses transporting tourists to nearby tourist attractions—in coordination with tourism companies—as well as facilities for the reception of solid and liquid waste, among other services.

The Suez Canal Authority (SCA) complemented these efforts by introducing transit discounts of up to 50% for cruise ships passing through the canal, provided that they call at Egyptian ports for up to 72 hours. This incentive effectively encourages cruise operators to include at least two Egyptian ports in their itineraries while sailing through Egyptian territorial waters, given that cruise ships typically spend approximately one day at each port of call.

Additional government measures have also contributed to promoting cruise tourism. In March 2022, the relevant authorities authorized nationals of more than 180 countries to obtain an emergency entry visa upon arrival at Egypt's ports of entry, provided they held valid, previously used visas issued by countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, or Japan. This measure has proved particularly beneficial for cruise passengers, many of whom decide at the last minute to disembark and undertake short sightseeing visits during their vessels' stay in port.

Third:

The Way Forward

The Egyptian government has yet to announce a comprehensive strategy for developing the country's cruise tourism sector. Although it stated in June 2025 that the Ministry of Transport aims to attract one million cruise tourists annually, this ambitious objective has not yet been accompanied by a comprehensive vision for managing such a multifaceted sector. Cruise tourism requires close coordination among several government entities, including the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Transport, and the Suez Canal Authority (SCA). Each plays a vital role in facilitating the experience of international visitors arriving in Egypt aboard cruise ships. Their respective responsibilities include the following:

1. Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities

- Through the Egyptian Tourism Authority (ETA), the Ministry can promote cruise tourism as a promising segment of Egypt's tourism industry while raising international awareness of the destinations and resorts that cruise passengers can visit during shore excursions.
- The Ministry can also design tourism programs and itineraries tailored to the needs of cruise passengers, whose visits are typically limited to short shore excursions. Such programs could be developed in cooperation with the Egyptian Federation of Tourism Chambers, the official representative of Egypt's tourism companies responsible for delivering these services on the ground.
- The Ministry could also engage with cruise operators serving the eastern Mediterranean to encourage them to include Egyptian ports in their itineraries and to designate Egypt as both an embarkation and disembarkation point for selected cruise routes. Such a move would

significantly increase tourism revenues by encouraging passengers to extend their stay in Egypt before or after their cruise voyage.

- The Ministry could also explore partnerships with its counterparts in neighboring countries along the Mediterranean and Red Sea to establish a regional cruise tourism alliance that markets nearby destinations as integrated tourism packages. Such cooperation would enhance the attractiveness of cruise itineraries operating in both seas.

2. Ministry of Interior

- Through the General Directorate of Passports, Immigration, and Nationality, the Ministry of Interior plays a key role in facilitating the entry and departure of tourists arriving aboard cruise ships by processing entry procedures and issuing visas. However, any substantial increase in cruise traffic will place additional operational demands on the Ministry. This makes it essential for the Ministry to be fully informed of future plans for developing the sector so that it can adapt its operational procedures and administrative capacity accordingly.

3. Ministry of Health

- The Ministry of Health continuously monitors the global epidemiological situation to prevent the introduction of infectious diseases into Egypt and to ensure preparedness for responding to potential public health threats. Its objective is to prevent future pandemics similar to the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, the H1N1 influenza pandemic in 2009, and the avian influenza outbreak in 2006. Cruise ships are widely recognized as environments in which infectious disease outbreaks can spread rapidly, given that they bring together travelers from across the world, including passengers who may have recently visited countries experiencing serious communicable disease outbreaks. This risk was illustrated most recently by the outbreak aboard the Dutch cruise ship *Hondius* off Spain's Canary Islands.
- Such scenarios underscore the importance of ensuring that the Ministry of Health remains fully informed of developments in Egypt's cruise

tourism sector. This would enable the Ministry to advise policymakers in the tourism and transport sectors on the public health implications of expanding cruise tourism, while also developing comprehensive response plans for potential health emergencies aboard cruise ships calling at Egyptian ports.

4. Suez Canal Authority

- Beyond its well-established role in facilitating the northbound and southbound transit of cruise ships through the Suez Canal, the Suez Canal Authority (SCA) can play a pivotal role in strengthening Egypt's position in the Mediterranean market for cruise ship maintenance, refurbishment, and repair. This market is currently dominated by a limited number of countries, foremost among them Italy, which operates eight specialized shipyards dedicated to these activities. This specialization enables Italy to generate approximately €2.7 billion in annual revenues from cruise ship maintenance and repair services.
- The SCA could allocate part of the capacity of its shipyards and industrial facilities in Port Said, Port Tawfik, Ismailia (El-Timsah Shipyard), and the southern Red Sea to support this activity. As these capabilities are promoted internationally and demand grows, they would also stimulate a broad network of supporting industries across Egypt.

The current fragmented approach to cruise tourism development limits the sector's growth by preventing the various government entities involved from performing their complementary roles. Limited international promotion of Egypt's coastal cruise destinations suppresses demand for cruise tourism, while the absence of integrated packages of financial and service incentives discourages cruise operators from directing a larger share of their itineraries to Egypt. By contrast, competing destinations actively offer such incentives. Moreover, the lack of attractive tourism and recreational facilities in the immediate hinterland of some Egyptian ports reduces passengers' willingness to disembark, making these destinations less attractive to international cruise operators.

The foregoing analysis highlights the need for an institutional coordination mechanism that brings together all entities supporting the cruise tourism sector, enabling Egypt to realize the full potential of this promising tourism segment. A logical starting point would be the Ministerial Committee for Tourism and Antiquities, chaired by the Prime Minister and comprising the ministers responsible for matters related to this file, while ensuring close coordination with the Suez Canal Authority (SCA) in advancing cruise tourism development.

The next step should be the formulation of a comprehensive national strategy for developing Egypt's cruise tourism sector. Such a strategy would provide all relevant government entities with a common framework, encompassing clearly defined strategic objectives, sector-specific policies, implementation programs, and performance indicators. Drawing on the experience of leading Mediterranean cruise destinations, the strategy could focus on the following priorities:

- Setting annual targets for the share of cruise passengers within Egypt's total inbound tourism market.
- Determining the passenger-handling capacity required at Egypt's cruise terminals.
- Identifying the tourism destinations best suited to benefit from cruise tourism, those requiring further tourism infrastructure development, and destinations where cruise activity should be limited because of inadequate infrastructure or tourism saturation.
- Identifying areas of value addition in which Egypt can establish a regional competitive advantage, including specialized maritime services and logistics, alongside conventional cruise tourism activities.
- Establishing standards to safeguard Egypt's marine environment in a manner that accommodates the operational requirements of cruise tourism while remaining aligned with evolving international environmental standards.

- Designing flexible packages of financial and operational incentives for cruise operators. These may include performance-based incentives linked to passenger volumes, as well as additional discounts or exemptions on port dues and Suez Canal transit fees for cruise ships that make frequent calls at Egyptian ports, together with other incentives consistent with Egypt's national capabilities.

In conclusion, cruise tourism has the potential to become a major growth sector in Egypt, provided it is supported by an integrated institutional and strategic framework that enables the country to capitalize on its considerable competitive advantages. Such an approach would strengthen Egypt's ability to compete with the Mediterranean's leading cruise destinations while opening new channels for inbound tourism. At the same time, cruise tourism would diversify Egypt's tourism products and services, enhancing the attractiveness of the country's tourism offering to international visitors. The resulting increase in tourism activity would contribute to stronger and more resilient economic growth, thereby reinforcing one of the fundamental pillars of Egypt's national security.

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38. Egyptian Cabinet, Minister of Transport Inspects the Alexandria Cruise Passenger Terminal, official Facebook page of the Egyptian Cabinet, July 10, 2025. <https://www.facebook.com/EgyptianCabinet/posts/1278813250955759/>
39. According to the Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA), approximately 60% of cruise passengers spend one or more nights in their embarkation port before the start of their voyage, while 54% spend one or more nights in their disembarkation port after the cruise. During these stays, passengers typically book hotel accommodations or short-term rental properties and spend additional money on restaurants, local attractions, and other tourism-related activities, thereby generating additional economic benefits for the host destination. State of the Cruise Industry Report 2025, Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA). <https://cruising.org/resources/state-cruise-industry-report-2025>
40. Hantavirus cluster linked to cruise ship travel, Multi-country, WHO official website, 4th of May 2026. <https://www.who.int/emergencies/disease-outbreak-news/item/2026-DON599>
41. Made in Europe report, Cruise line international association.
42. Economic contribution of cruise tourism to Europe 2024, report, Cruise line international association, January 2026. https://cruising.org/sites/default/files/202603-/CLIA_Europe_2024_Final_Report.pdf
43. See Prime Ministers Decision No. 1800 of 2022 on the formation of the Ministerial Committee for Tourism. <https://mota.gov.eg/media/yowj4m22/قرار-الوزير-للسنة-2022.pdf>
44. A similar approach has been adopted under incentive programs designed to promote charter flights. Turkey, for example, introduced such a scheme in 2018, offering fixed financial incentives to cruise operators for each international tourist arriving by cruise ship during the off-season, when tourism demand is generally lower. For further details, see: «Turkey Introduces Financial Reward Scheme to <https://www.cruisemapper.com/news/3875-turkey-introduces-financial-reward-scheme-raise-cruise-ship-calls>