

# Snap shot

Al-Ahram Weekly Online

1 - 7 November 2007

Issue No. 869

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2007/869/tr401.htm>

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SOME call it Coral Island, others Geziret Faroun, but if you just ask for Saladin Fortress, you can't go wrong. **Mohamed El Hebeishy** sets sail to rediscover a small rocky island off Sinai's coast.

The almost two square kilometres island, 250 metres off Taba, holds a strategic location that enticed various forces in the region across the ages. Theories propose that the Phoenicians, around the 10th century BC, were the first to make use of the island and its natural harbour adding an incentive they smartly used to increase their trade with Egypt. Later came the Byzantines, the first to leave significant evidence of their presence -- church ruins on the island's ground level that date back to Justinian IV. The importance of Pharaoh's Island did not reveal itself until the Holy Wars flared in the region.

The original citadel was actually built by the Crusaders in 1170 AD. Back then it was called Ile de Graye.

When the legendary Muslim leader Saladin put an end to the Shia Fatimids rulers and established Sunnism as the dominant faith of Egypt, he turned east to the Holy Land, regaining Jerusalem from the Crusaders immediately after the famous battle of Hattin fought near Lake Tiberias on 5 July 1187. On his march to liberate Palestine, Saladin ordered the seizure of the island fortress in 1171 AD. The entire citadel was then redeveloped. Geziret Faroun continued to maintain its importance as a vital harbour for traders as well as pilgrims bound for Mecca.

The citadel was fortified during the Mameluke and Ottoman eras; 1986 marked the major restoration efforts.

A regular shuttle boat takes visitors from the coast to the island and back for LE10. The island's entrance fees are LE2 for Egyptians and LE20 for foreigners.

photo: Mohamed El-Hebeishy