

Egypt unveils rare whale fossil museum to boost tourism (Update)

January 14 2016, byNour Youssef



The largest intact Basulosaurus isis whale fossil, which is on display at the Wati El Hitan Fossils and Climate Change Museum, on the opening day, in the Fayoum oasis, Egypt, Thursday, Jan. 14, 2016. Egypt has cut the ribbon on the Middle East's first fossil museum housing the world's largest intact skeleton of a "walking whale" in an attempt to attract much-needed tourists driven off by recent militant attacks. (AP Photo/Thomas Hartwell)

Egypt on Thursday unveiled what it said is the Middle East's first

museum dedicated to fossils that showcases an early form of whales, now extinct and known as the "walking whale."

The unveiling is part of concentrated government efforts to attract much-needed tourists, driven away by recent militant attacks, and restore confidence in the safety of its attractions.

Security concerns were palpable as media crews toured the new museum at the desert Valley of the Whales, located about 170 kilometers (105 miles) southwest of the capital, Cairo. Dozens of heavily-armed military officers in black balaclavas stood guard alongside plainclothes policemen, poorly disguised in local Bedouin dress that short enough to reveal their uniforms underneath.

Egypt's tourist numbers fell sharply in the years since the 2011 popular uprising ousted Egypt's longtime autocrat Hosni Mubarak. A long running Islamic insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula intensified after the 2013 ouster by the military of Mubarak's successor, Islamist President Mohammed Morsi, worsening tourism woes.

The construction of the much-hyped Fossils and Climate Change Museum was covered a 2 billion euros (2.17 billion dollars) grant from Italy, according to Italian Ambassador Maurizio Massari.



A visitor views the largest intact *Basulosaurs* whale fossil, which is on display at the Wati El Hitan Fossils and Climate Change Museum, on the opening day, in the Fayoum oasis, Egypt, Thursday, Jan. 14, 2016. Egypt has cut the ribbon on the Middle East's first fossil museum housing the world's largest intact skeleton of a "walking whale" in an attempt to attract much-needed tourists driven off by recent militant attacks.(AP Photo/Thomas Hartwell)

Its centerpiece is an intact, 37-million-year-old and 20-meter-long skeleton of a legged form of whale that testifies to how modern-day whales evolved from land mammals.

The sand-colored, dome-shaped museum is barely discernible in the breathtaking desert landscape that stretches all around.

"When you build something somewhere so beautiful and unique, it has to blend in with its surrounding ... or it would be a crime against nature,"

the museum's architect Gabriel Mikhail said, pointing to the surrounding sand dunes.



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"We are confident visitors will come," he added, smiling.

Egypt's tourism industry was further shattered by the suspected terror bombing that brought down the Russian airliner over Sinai last October, killing all 224 people on board. The Islamic State group has claimed responsibility for that attack.

The Valley of the Whales' museum is also home to prehistoric tools used by early humans and various whale fossils exhibited in glass boxes corroborating the evolutionary transition of the early whales from land to water creatures.



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A supposedly unique rock collection was seemingly hastily numbered by a permanent blue marker.

But Environment Minister Khaled Fahmy cautioned against interpreting

the museum's opening as a "full endorsement of the theory of evolution," which conflicts with Islam.

"That is an entirely different matter," he said. "We are still tied to our Islamic belief system."



Egyptian Army soldiers stand guard outside the Wati El Hitan Fossils and Climate Change Museum, a UNESCO natural World Heritage site, on the opening day, in the Fayoum oasis, Egypt, Thursday, Jan. 14, 2016. Egypt has cut the ribbon on the Middle East's first fossil museum housing the world's largest intact skeleton of a "walking whale" in an attempt to attract much-needed tourists driven off by recent militant attacks.(AP Photo/Thomas Hartwell)



Guards stand outside the Wati El Hitan Fossils and Climate Change Museum, a UNESCO natural World Heritage site, on the opening day, in the oasis of Fayoum, Egypt, Thursday, Jan. 14, 2016. Egypt has cut the ribbon on the Middle East's first fossil museum housing the world's largest intact skeleton of a "walking whale" in an attempt to attract much-needed tourists driven off by recent militant attacks. (AP Photo/Thomas Hartwell)



The Wati El Hitan Fossil sand Climate Change Museum, a UNESCO natural World Heritage site, is seen on the opening day, in the Fayoum oasis, Egypt, Thursday, Jan. 14, 2016. Egypt has cut the ribbon on the Middle East's first fossil museum housing the world's largest intact skeleton of a "walking whale" in an attempt to attract much-needed tourists driven off by recent militant attacks. (AP Photo/Thomas Hartwell)



Fossilized whale bones are on display outside the Wati El Hitan Fossils and Climate Change Museum, a UNESCO natural World Heritage site, on the opening day, in the Fayoum oasis, Egypt, Thursday, Jan. 14, 2016. Egypt has cut the ribbon on the Middle East's first fossil museum housing the world's largest intact skeleton of a "walking whale" in an attempt to attract much-needed tourists driven off by recent militant attacks.(AP Photo/Thomas Hartwell)



Egyptian Army vehicles stand outside the Wati El Hitan Fossils and Climate Change Museum, a UNESCO natural World Heritage site, on the opening day, in the Fayoum oasis, Egypt, Thursday, Jan. 14, 2016. Egypt has cut the ribbon on the Middle East's first fossil museum housing the world's largest intact skeleton of a "walking whale" in an attempt to attract much-needed tourists driven off by recent militant attacks.(AP Photo/Thomas Hartwell)



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Fossilized whale bones are on display outside the Wati El Hitan Fossils and Climate Change Museum, in background, a UNESCO natural World Heritage site, on the opening day, in the Fayoum oasis, Egypt, Thursday, Jan. 14, 2016. Egypt has cut the ribbon on the Middle East's first fossil museum housing the world's largest intact skeleton of a "walking whale" in an attempt to attract much-needed tourists driven off by recent militant attacks. (AP Photo/Thomas Hartwell)



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