In 1994, in the waters off Alexandria, Egypt, a team of scuba divers searched the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea. Using floating masts, satellites, and a special measuring station on shore, they marked the exact position of some large blocks of stone under the water. Then they put the data into computers to create a map of the sea floor.

The divers were excited. They were sure they had found what they were searching for. There, at the bottom of the sea, lay the ruins of the Pharos, the great lighthouse of Alexandria, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

The lighthouse stood on the island of Pharos, in the harbor of the city of Alexandria. Its story begins in Alexandria, which was founded by Alexander the Great in 332 B.C. Alexander wanted to build a splendid city that would bear his name. When he died before the city was completed, Ptolemy Soter, the new ruler of Egypt, finished his work.
Under Ptolemy, Alexandria thrived. Trade was important to the city, and its harbor was busy. As the city grew, it needed a way to guide ships through the harbor. Also, it needed a symbol, something that would stand for its riches and greatness. So Ptolemy ordered the building of the lighthouse in 290 B.C. Twenty years later, it was finished—the first lighthouse in the world and the tallest building on Earth, besides the Great Pyramid of Egypt.

![Map of Ancient Alexandria](image)

MAP OF ANCIENT ALEXANDRIA

- (a) Canal
- (b) City walls
- (c) City dockyards and quays
- (d) Amphitheater
- (e) Gymnasium
- (f) Library and museum
- (g) Hall of justice
- (h) Stadium
- (i) Aqueduct from the Nile
- (j) Hippodrome

The Pharos was designed by Sostrates, a Greek architect. Sostrates, proud of his work, wanted to carve his name into the base of the lighthouse. Ptolemy refused, ordering that only his own name appear on the building. But Sostrates found a way to trick him. At the base of the Pharos, Sostrates carved a message containing his own name. Then he covered it with plaster and carved Ptolemy’s name over it. After many years, the plaster chipped away to show the true architect of the lighthouse.
Of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, six no longer exist. The Pharos was the last to be built and, except for the Great Pyramid, the last to stay standing. Much of what we know about the lighthouse comes from the writings of Arab conquerors. In 1166, an Arab traveler who visited the Pharos wrote a careful description of it. From his and other reports, people have been able to create models that probably look very much like the real thing.

The Pharos was about 384 feet tall, the same height as a modern 40-story building. It was made of marble blocks and had three levels. The lowest was a huge box about 200 feet high and 100 feet square. A large spiral ramp that began at this level was used to pull materials to the top in horse-drawn carts. Above the first level was an eight-sided tower, and above the tower was a cylinder. At the top of this cylinder was a beacon, the source of light for the lighthouse. Above the beacon stood a large statue of Poseidon, the Greek god of the sea.
The Pharos used two types of beacons. At night, a bonfire created the light. During the day, a mirror reflected the sun’s rays to create the light. This mirror was probably a large, round disc made of polished metal. By some reports, the light from the Pharos could be seen from up to 100 miles away.

Other stories say that the mirror was used as a weapon as well as a light source. Some believe that the mirror was used to set enemy ships on fire as they entered the harbor by directing the sun’s rays at them. While the idea is interesting, it is also highly unlikely.

From the beginning, the Pharos attracted tourists. At the top of the first level, food was sold to visitors. People could climb a stairway in the eight-sided tower to a balcony that looked out over the sea. The Pharos was a grand sight from the water. Its ever-present light was the bright eye of the city. Even Roman coins were stamped with its image.

In 1302 and 1323, two strong earthquakes hit Alexandria, damaging the lighthouse. Most reports say that in 1326, it finally fell into the sea. But another, more colorful tale persists. Alexandria competed with Constantinople, another Mediterranean port, for trade. This story says that the Emperor of Constantinople wanted to weaken Alexandria’s hold on trade. So he came up with a plan to get rid of the Pharos. He told people that a great treasure was buried under the lighthouse. When the rumor spread to Egypt, the ruler of Alexandria ordered that the Pharos be torn down. By the time the top and second levels were gone, the ruler knew he had been tricked. Though he tried to rebuild the lighthouse, too much of it had already been removed. So he built a mosque in its place.
Many people have argued about whether the stone blocks found at the bottom of the sea were really once part of the lighthouse. After recovering and studying the blocks, scientists found that they date from a time before the lighthouse. Most now believe that the ancient Egyptians recycled materials from older buildings to build new ones. So it is likely that the divers did in fact find the ruins of the Pharos.

There are plans to turn the site of the Pharos into a park with a lighthouse museum. One day, visitors may also be able to snorkel and dive in the harbor where the Pharos once stood. Until that time, the great lighthouse will live on in both the area’s architecture and its languages. The French, Italian, and Spanish words for lighthouse all come from the word pharos.