

EGYPT – THE CITY OF CAIRO

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Egypt has always fascinated me. The thrill of Antiquity, the Gods, Temples, Tombs, structures thousands of years old, all work on the imagination leading one to wonder how those people lived, what was their everyday life. We know how civilised they were, the highly sophisticated society they developed, the paintings, artwork, hieroglyphics, architecture, with its intricacies of design all bear witness to an advanced level of education, thinking and knowledge.

Today modern Egypt is a large country in which 99% of the population inhabit 4% of the surface area – an impressive statistic! in other words there is just a narrow strip of habitation along the banks of the Nile (over 1,500 kilometres inside Egypt) and on the shores of the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, the whole rest of the country being arid uninhabitable desert. The most important settlements are and always were around the Nile Delta and the Valley. Egypt links North Africa with the Middle East and therefore has a strategic role to play in the politics of the area and its history goes back beyond 3000 BC when the first known settlers were recorded.

I have travelled to Egypt many times and each visit provides a new and startling experience. These articles will be a compilation of several trips, to Cairo, Alexandria, Luxor, as well as Aswan, Abu Simbel and then round to the Red Sea and Dahab, Saint Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai – but I get ahead of myself ...

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The first time I arrive in Egypt I land in Cairo, naturally. The taxi driver from the airport helpfully points out various landmarks as we speed into the City well after midnight. The Great Mosque, built by Muhammed Ali in the 19th century, largest in the world he tells me, and the oldest mosque in Africa, the Mosque of Amr abn as At, which I find out later dates back to 640 AD. We pass the Cities of the Dead, Cairo's version of Calcutta's City of Joy where the city's poorest dwell in their thousands, rather gruesomely amongst the gravestones of the huge cemetery.

I have booked into the Windsor Hotel, a charming old colonial hotel, though somewhat run down and shabby. There seems to be no-one else staying in the hotel. It is after 1 o'clock in the morning and kindly Mohammed takes me up in the ancient lift, the first one in all Egypt he says proudly (and I can believe it) showing me to my room.

After an easy night's rest and breakfast I go out walking. Cairo is just the sort of noisy busy dirty bustling chaotic city, bursting with life, that I enjoy. Soon I am wandering in downtown Cairo and onto Talaat Harb Shariya, a beautiful long central street lined with shops and cafes which opens out onto the famous Tahrir Square. It feels familiar yet different after Turkey, the buildings are more European than those of Istanbul, due to the Italian French and British influences while it was a Protectorate.

I have an address to look up of someone who will facilitate my travels in this totally foreign country, thus I meet Mustafa – a charming talkative fellow who offers to show me around the City. I have become used to sizing up people and since I have very little idea of what I want to see (the Pyramids? the Sphinxes?) I am happy to be taken. He turns out to be an able and informative guide. First he takes me to have a Turkish coffee in a charming walkway, with leafy Palm trees and old street lamps, coffee houses and shi-sha bars all down one side with long tables where are seated many locals (nearly all men) reading their mid-



Sarcophagus in the Egyptian Museum

morning papers. We talk to several people about the country and its problems. Later when the troubles break out in January 2011 I think of these men and wonder what is happening with them ...

We share a shi-sha pipe and it is very pleasant sitting in the warm sunshine chatting. He shows me the Cosmopolitan Hotel and I resolve to move here when I come back to Cairo. It is in better condition than the Windsor, has a funky Bar and I like this neighbourhood.

Mustafa takes me to the Souk of *Khan El Khalili* that first day which I probably would not have ventured to without him and we have another coffee at the famed *El Fishawy*, the oldest cafe inside the Souk. I am familiar with gigantic Oriental markets especially after the unparalleled *Kapali Carsi* in Istanbul, and this does not disappoint. Each country has its own version of Souk and here it seems more relaxed than Istanbul and strangely less hassle.

Later I meet a friend for a drink at the Excelsior, a bit different from the Souk! We walk to Garden City, Embassy land, a wealthy residential district where we have a Meze dinner in a smart restaurant. Afterwards we go to the Cairo Jazz Club in Zamalek on Gezira Island in the middle of the Nile but there is no live music so we wander down to Abu el Sid which is much more atmospheric and fun.

I decide to look for Dr Alaa Aswany, an Egyptian writer whose book "The Yacoubian Building" I much

enjoyed and who apparently can easily be found downtown. I find the actual building on Talaat Harb though not him. I ask around and find he hangs out at various places, the Cafe Richelieu, the Grossi, the Cosmopolitan Hotel but each time I get there, he has always just left ...

The Egyptian Museum in Cairo is one of the most remarkable that I know. Every time I go to Cairo I cannot leave without seeing it again. It was first established in 1835 but the enormous Pharaonic collection was brought to its present location in 1902. The building is huge enough to house the giant statuary and the many objects buried inside the tombs or pyramids of the Pharaohs. The Department of

Culture is in the process of re-locating the collection again to a site near the Pyramids but I hope this does not happen soon. Everything here is dusty and old and many of the pieces in disrepair – again I am reminded of the Indian Museum in Calcutta! but I love this building and its history, the fascinating objects, the ancient Mummies wrapped in their shrouds, the enormous Colossi.

The gold and enamel death mask of the young King Tutankhamun is extraordinary. The first time I see it I am, strangely, alone in the gallery. The walls are painted a strong dark blue and the head shines out in contrast. Everything pales beside it. His beautiful noble face is proud and unforgiving and yet he met a terrible end. Slowly one begins to notice the rest of the room where his sarcophagus and outer tomb are magnificently displayed together with jewellery and arms and other artefacts found in his Tomb. The Museum is a good preparation for going to Giza and the Pyramids and Luxor and all the other Ancient sites.

I go back to the Cosmopolitan to see if Dr Alaa is there and find he has just left for Italy! But I meet several of his friends who are charming and invite me to share their dinner, telling me he will be back when I return from the south. So I have a rendez-vous in two weeks time and promise to come and meet them all again.

Finally I get to the Pyramids. First I visit Saqqara, where the oldest Pyramids are situated, including the famed Step Pyramid or the Pyramid of Djoser. These were built around 2700BC, nearly 5000 years ago, a vast necropolis

for the people of Memphis, the ancient capital. I go down into one pyramid, a painful experience as one has to crouch and it is deep deep into the heart of the stone. The tombs at Saqqara however are wonderful, highly decorated with scenes of everyday life spread across the walls like cartoons. These tell stories of hunting and fishing, whales with fishermen dramatically chopping off their fins – bullocks, horses, all easily recognisable. There are simple scenes of harvesting, fishing with small nets, scribes writing and accountants recording the payment of taxes, some of the most beautiful reliefs I have seen.

Then on to Dahshur, the Bent Pyramid with its shiny alabaster peak and the Red Pyramid which again I go down into, huge and an even more difficult descent. It is dark and warm and very deep with a network of tall chambers and wooden stepways although nothing very much inside and I am glad to get out into the sunlight again!

Giza is probably the most well known site of the Pyramids. The Great Pyramid of Cheops, together with those of Khafre and Menkaure form a triangle of pyramids dating from 2500BC. I opt to visit the site on camel back – I have walked down into enough Pyramids to last a lifetime, the outside I find much more intriguing. The calculations needed to build the monuments were made using cubits (a unit of measurement based on the length between the middle finger and the base of the elbow, usually around 45 – 50cm) and are incredibly accurate. Stone was brought from other parts of Egypt some being rolled from nearby quarries and some using the waters of the Nile to transport it from as far away as Aswan, the whole construction being an extraordinarily complex task that has excited and perplexed scientists and archaeologists for centuries.

A Sphinx is a mythical being, comprising the head of a woman, the body of a lion, and the wings of a bird. The Great Sphinx of Giza still stands implacable, looking out over the plains of Giza, its nose destroyed by vandals, some say by Napoleon's army who used it for target practice. Originally there were other sphinxes meant to be the Guardians of the site, but now there remains only one.

Back in Cairo I have my rendezvous with Dr Alaa. I turn up at the Cosmopolitan Hotel after midnight as requested and there he is at last, addressing a large meeting of around fifty men. How embarrassing! but he sees me at the back and jumps up to welcome me, beckoning me

forward. I explain that I am on a mission and he laughs – it seems the other men have told him I am coming. He smiles warmly and says he will be about another hour but please do wait and have supper with him and his friends after the meeting.

Dr Alaa is a big burly man with flashing brown eyes and an imposing presence – a larger than life character used to holding forth, hypnotising his audience, regaling them with stories jokes and anecdotes. His friends clearly revere and adore him and he them.

Around 1am Dr Alaa is winding up the Seminar and most of the crowd have melted away leaving about a dozen men. He signals me to join them as food and drink is brought in, which they tuck into hungrily. Politics is hard work! And then the discussions begin. Dr Alaa is all solicitousness, making me sit by his side, talking to me, asking questions and then translating freely what is going on, as naturally they are all Arabic speaking. I wish I understood more! but I do understand that I am in the company of the intelligentsia, the cream of Egyptian society. These are men engaged in the complex mental labours that lead, guide and shape their country's politics and culture. They are bright lively and questioning and most curious about me and we talk animatedly about life in Paris and my impressions of their country.

It is a fascinating evening. I sit next to a charming Professor of Music at Cairo University. One guest is Egypt's most famous cartoonist, for the best National Daily, another is the foremost translator of African literature into Arabic, another two are top Engineers, another a leading psychiatrist etc etc. They are all political activists, members of "ENUF" or "enough" and we talk about the dangers of being dissident in this country. They all hate Mubarak's seemingly* untouchable regime, regret Farouk and even Nasser. There is no democracy here. Most of the men around the table have been detained, beaten and jailed but so far the authorities have never touched Dr Alaa.

I feel privileged to have enjoyed their company during a whole night – for it is nearly 7am when they begin to leave and I, sleepy now, finally get to bed. Apparently they do this every week when Dr Alaa is in town.

In the next articles I travel to Alexandria, to Luxor, Aswan and the Red Sea – every destination a magical revelation. I much hope my readers will join me along the journey ... □