

## EGYPT – THE CITY OF CAIRO

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**E**gypt 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-