

Eternal Egypt

Egyptians love to be outdoors during summer evenings. In Alexandria, where I spent the first of my three weeks in Egypt, the streets were full of activity late into the night. On the main thoroughfares, shops stayed open, and I could peek into the cafes and catch bits of the music playing within. Along the beachfront roadway and promenade called the “Corniche,” there were joggers, couples

strolling arm in arm, and men fishing from the rocks. Families had blankets laid out along the beach, and young children—seemingly with no bedtime—played in the water lapping up from the Mediterranean surf.

I’d come to Alexandria to teach technical writing at the University of Alexandria, courtesy of the Fulbright Commission. On some evenings I dined

with my gracious hosts. But on work nights I would shut down my laptop by 10:00 or 11:00, step out of my hotel and enjoy the city’s exuberant energy.

The city was founded by Alexander the Great in 331 B.C., and for centuries it was a jewel of the Greco-Roman world. The great Alexandrian Library was unequaled as a center of learning and scholarship. Euclid, Archimedes and

some of the ancient world’s most important astronomers studied and wrote at the library. In the harbor stood the 440-foot Pharos Lighthouse, one of the Seven Wonders of the World. The library and lighthouse are long gone, but a magnificent new Alexandrian library recently opened.

During my free hours I explored the city. The Graeco-Roman Museum, the Roman Amphitheater and other surviving antiquities brought that period of the city’s long history to life. And, much to

THE OLDEST OF THE PYRAMIDS OF GIZA WAS BUILT MORE THAN 4,500 YEARS AGO.



JOHN ELK III

By David K. Farkas

EGYPT



FOUNDED IN 331 B.C., ALEXANDRIA IS EGYPT'S LARGEST CITY ON THE MEDITERRANEAN.

my surprise, I came face-to-face with some statues and busts I remembered from my high school Latin textbooks.

The city's handsome and historic mosques can be visited, if you pay attention and observe protocol. Fort Qaitbey, which dates back to the 15th century, is a city landmark. Its imposing towers and parapets of white limestone gleam in the sun. You can wander through the fort's courtyards and passageways (with openings for gunners cut through the thick walls), and you can enjoy wonderful views of the harbor and the city skyline.

There are luxurious beachfront resort hotels on the outskirts of the city and farther along the coast. It's therefore very easy to combine a familiar fun-in-the-sun vacation with measured doses of a foreign culture.

There was nothing I liked better than wandering the city streets, and I strolled everywhere. After a few days, hearing the call to prayer booming through the streets from loudspeakers didn't seem so strange. Most men dress in Western clothes, but some wear long robes. Most women wear simple head scarves; some wear full-length black *abayas*; and some women (including the Coptic Christians) leave their hair uncovered. Soon the different clothing and a hundred other things that are not typical of the United States became familiar.

Starting in the 1830s Alexandria become a truly international city with significant British, French, Greek, Italian, Turkish and Syrian populations. There was theater, opera and society balls, and wealthy foreigners built luxurious villas in Art Deco, Neoclassical, neo-Byzantine and other architectural

styles. This is the Alexandria of Lawrence Durrell (author of the *Alexandria Quartet* novels) and of the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy. This era ended in 1957, following the nationalization of the Suez Canal by President Gamal Nasser. But the architecture of colonial Alexandria remains, including the elegant Hotel Cecil and Metropole Hotel. Visit the glass and steel Zahran Mall and Smouha Shopping Center to see today's westernized Alexandria.

Abu Kir is a small coastal city about 18 miles east of Alexandria. It was home during my second week in Egypt, when I taught at the Arab Academy for Science and Technology. The streets are full of brightly colored carts pulled by sleek horses. Children, especially, climb in for a ride through the town. When there's a soccer game, TVs and clusters of plastic chairs are set up on the streets, and one evening I sat down and helped cheer the Cairo team to a victory over Syria. Knowing just a bit about soccer, and especially international competition, can help you create instant camaraderie with strangers.

On another night, I came across a bachelor party being held in the court-

yard of an apartment building. (The women were all looking down from balconies.) I watched from a discreet distance, but I was soon invited into the circle of clapping men and then (how could I resist!) I was coaxed into the center of the crowd to dance (clumsily) with the groom and his buddies.

When my teaching duties were over, I took the train to Cairo, to meet my friend Joe, who flew in to join me for a final week of touring. (My wife was unable to join me this trip, but I plan to bring her next time. I'm eager to visit Sharm el-Sheikh, Mt. Sinai and the oases of the Western Desert.) Cairo is a big city—18 million people—but it's easy enough to navigate with taxis and a very handsome and efficient subway system.

The Egyptian Antiquities Museum is home to the gold coffin and other treasures of King Tut, to massive sculptures, chariots, mummies, armies of miniature soldiers and some of the world's most important papyrus rolls. The museum absolutely calls for a full day's visit or, better yet, two half-days, to avoid cognitive overload.

Among the artifacts that especially drew my attention were the four sculptures of Pharaoh Akhenaten (c. 1352-1336 B.C.) and representations of other royal personages. Akhenaten and Queen Nefertiti established a short-lived religious cult devoted to the worship of a single god, Aten. Casual visitors and scholars alike ponder the mysterious relationship linking these rulers, how they are represented, and their new form of worship.

The Citadel was originally built in



JOHN ELK III

FELUCCAS PLY THE WATERS OF THE NILE AROUND ELEPHANTINE ISLAND.

1176 by Saladin, the respected foe of the Crusaders, and was much expanded by the 19th-century ruler Mohammed Ali. Of the many magnificent mosques, perhaps the most beautiful is the 14th-century Mosque of Sultan Hassan, an elaborate complex whose thick walls enclose an open courtyard, the sultan's own tomb and four enormous recessed chambers (*iwans*) with high, elegantly pointed arches. You can still see the medieval medical clinic and theological school with dorm rooms cut into the inside of the courtyard walls.

At many of Egypt's historical sites you will find freelance tour guides. My suggestion: Ask a question or two, and if the guide seems knowledgeable and reasonably proficient in English, hire the guide.

The greatest of the pyramids and the Sphinx are located near Cairo, just

beyond the sprawling suburb of Giza. Peering from the observation platform of the Cairo Tower, I watched the pyramids, distant and faint, disappear slowly into the darkening sky. Strangely, I cherish this memory as much as those of the close-up views I got the next morning. The pyramids astound, both as feats of ancient engineering and as a testament to a culture's focus on the afterlife. Now they stand in the desert sand, but they were originally built along the Nile (which has long since changed course). To envision the pyramids as they were in 2500 B.C., imagine the Nile, canals and lush vegetation.

From Cairo we flew to Luxor, where you will find the magnificent Luxor and Karnak temples and the tombs of the Valley of the Kings and Valley of the Queens. Queen Hatshepsut was a strong ruler who had herself buried among the kings. Whereas the temple art in many tombs commemorates conquests, Hatshepsut wanted to be remembered for establishing peaceful trade relations with Africa. You can still see the painted reliefs of giraffes, monkeys and ivory

objects. Many hotels will happily arrange a daylong excursion with a knowledgeable guide and an air-conditioned van.

After two days in Luxor, Joe and I took a three-hour taxi ride to Aswan, with stops at Edfu to see the Temple of Horus and at Kom Ombo to see the twin Temples of Haroeris and Sobek. Aswan—the traditional frontier between Egypt and Nubia (a region that was home to an ancient African kingdom)—is a delight. Here the Nile broadens out to accommodate several lush islands, easily visited via small ferries. (On one trip, I carelessly sat in the women's section. The women tittered and the captain gestured



DETAILED RELIEFS AND HIEROGLYPHICS ADORN MANY OF EGYPT'S ANCIENT TEMPLES.

When You Go

ALEXANDRIA

El-Salamlek Palace

(Montazah Palace Gardens; 011-20-02-547-7999; www.san-giovanni.com), neighboring the presidential summer palace, is possibly Alexandria's most luxurious hotel. Doubles start at \$215.

The **Metropole Hotel** (52 Shar'a Sa'd Zaghulul; 011-20-03-484-1465) has large rooms, a

central location and excellent staff. Doubles start at \$120.

CAIRO

The **Nile Hilton** (Midan Tahrir; 011-20-02-578-0475; www.hilton.com) was Cairo's first international chain hotel, and retains its reputation as a comfortable oasis in the middle of the city. Many rooms offer views of the Nile. Doubles

start at \$250.

The **Windsor Hotel** (19 Shar'a Alfi Bay; 011-20-02-591-5277; www.windsorcairo.com), built in a former British Officer's Club, is known for its distinctive rooms (no two are alike) and colonial-era charm. Doubles start at \$47.

LUXOR

The **Sofitel Old Winter Palace**

(Corniche el-Nil; 011-20-09-538-0422) is one of Egypt's most famous and historic hotels. Doubles start at \$274.

ASWAN

The **Sofitel Old Cataract Hotel** (Shar'a Abtal al-Tahrir; 011-20-09-731-6000) occupies an elegant Moorish-style building overlooking the Nile. Doubles start at \$167.

sharply for me to change seats.) In Aswan you should visit the beautiful and thoroughly engrossing Nubian Museum, the present-day Nubian communities on Elephantine Island and the Nilometer, a stone gauge used for thousands of years to measure the water level of the all-important Nile. Pharaonic, Roman and Arab numerals are still visible.

Feluccas, traditional sailboats, are found along much of the Nile, but nowhere more so than at Aswan. Felucca captains and their associates approach you everywhere along the Aswan Corniche, hoping to sell you on a felucca trip lasting an hour or two or longer. We took several trips—why not? Quiet, breezy and scenic, this is a great way to end an afternoon.

The felucca captains often learn their trade as youngsters from family members, and they are skillful sailors. Working the big rudder with their foot, they can put the boat into a sharp turn and pull up within a foot of a dock. Often a boy has the job of climbing the tall mast to adjust the sail. On our last felucca trip, we came upon two boys in a crude bathtub-size sailboat (one sailed, one bailed). The bailer sang out loudly, “Row, row, row your boat” and waited for a response. I sang back, “gently down the stream.” Then he continued, “merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,” and as we drew past them, I finished our little duet, “life is but a dream.” What was the magic here? Will the boys remember this encounter? I certainly won’t forget it. In fact, for me, the joy of foreign travel is as much these moments as the museums and monuments. ▲

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getting there

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