

# LIFTING THE VEIL

PAYAL UTTAM travels to Cairo and is inspired by the city's resilience after the revolution

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EEP INSIDE A NARROW alley through a haze of shisha smoke, I see hips swinging and hands gliding gracefully through the air. A young girl is dancing to the beat of a tabla. Slowly she weaves her way through a row of copper tables. A man breaks into song, her pace intensifies and people begin clapping loudly. It's my second day in Cairo and I'm sipping syrupy mint tea at El Fishawy's cafe in the 14th-century souk Khan el-Khalili. I am in town for a friend's wedding and her Egyptian fiancé, Omar, is shepherding us through the hidden passageways of the bazaar. According to rumours, this is the oldest ahwa (traditional coffee house) in the city, he tells us.

Squeezing our way out of the cafe we plunge into a web of cobblestone streets. A tall stone gateway leads us into al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah Street, a major thoroughfare in medieval times. The winding road is lined with crumbling building facades and cavernous shops piled with cardamom-scented coffee, antiques and ornate metalware. Retro cars dating to the 1970s choke the small pathways as women balancing ladder-like trays of flatbread slip past the traffic. Around the corner, silver-bearded men in *abayas* (traditional robes) sit nursing shisha pipes, their faces wreathed in smoke.

Normally thronged with tourists, the street is filled with Arabs from neighbouring countries and only a handful of Europeans today. Since the revolution two years ago, Cairo has slid under the radar as a tourist destination. While the number of visitors is starting to pick up, we have the rare privilege of seeing the capital free from the chaos of mass tourism. Continuing down the road, we hear

hammering sounds coming from a few yards away. A craftsman is crouched under a lamp carving Arabic letters into a copper pot. As we stop to watch, the melodic call to prayer, "*Allah hu Akbar*," begins echoing through the streets. The sun drops behind minarets in the distance and the sky turns magenta. Men with *zabibas* on their foreheads (a small bruise from kneeling down in prayer) begin filing into a mosque. A sense of calm descends as

the clamour and bustle of the neighbourhood fades.

It may be the largest metropolis in the Arab world, but Cairo remains steeped in history. To spend a few days in the capital is to find oneself coiling backwards and forwards through time. From the Fatimids to the French, the city has been subjected to countless influences. Today, traces of its complex past lie everywhere. While Mu'izz

Street is one of the pockets that evoke its medieval history, a large portion of Cairo's cityscape was shaped by the European invasions that lasted through the 19th century.

Among the most iconic buildings from that period is our hotel, the former Al Gezira Palace on an island in the Nile. Built by the Khedive, Ismail Pasha, the grounds were converted into the Cairo Marriott Hotel

and Omar Khayyam Casino in 1982. "If you needed to reach it in 1869, you'd take a boat, nothing was here except the palace," says Abd Elhameed Marey, a group supervisor at the hotel. While the island has since developed and is now synonymous with affluent neighbourhoods such as Zamalek, the palace remains a beacon of the past.

With towering horseshoe archways, grand marble staircases and gilded interiors, the



PYRAMID AND SPHINX AT GIZA

TANIA CAGNONI / GETTY IMAGES



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property is a fascinating blend of European and Moorish architecture. According to local legend Khedive Ismail harboured a secret love for Empress Eugénie, Napoleon III's wife, and constructed the palace in 1869 to impress her during her visit to Egypt. To make her feel at home, he modelled much of it after the Tuileries Palace, her residence in Paris.

Among the most impressive parts of the palace are the royal gardens. Once adorned with thousands of exotic plants, they now play host to a sprawling outdoor restaurant nestled between palm trees planted in the 1800s. From deal makers and diplomats

holding morning meetings to the trendy younger set arriving by evening, the gardens have become a Cairo institution. “This is where the Egyptian elite come,” says Marey. “You can hardly get a seat on weekends.”

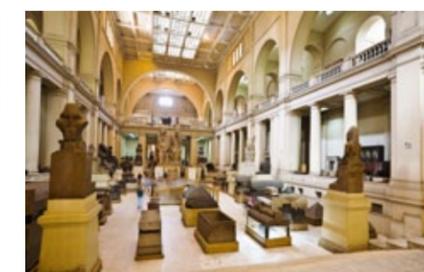
When we arrive for dinner one night, the aroma of freshly baked bread fills the air. We're seated in a leafy corner next to a group of young Cairenes. Dressed in leather jackets and fashionably styled hijabs (veils), their eyes darkened with heavy kohl, they sip small cups of Egyptian coffee. In a tented enclosure in front of us, two matronly women are making puffy discs of *baladi* bread in a brick oven. Navigating the menu we start with *raheb* (a creamy eggplant and tomato dip) and *zabadi* (a mint-infused yogurt salad) to scoop up with the steaming bread. Before long the table is crowded with colourful Egyptian-

ABOVE LEFT: RENÉ MATTES / HEMIS / CORBIS. LEFT: LUIS ORTEO / HEMIS / CORBIS

TOP: NEIL DONOVAN / GETTY IMAGES. RIGHT: J. RITTERBACH / F1 ONLINE / CORBIS. FAR RIGHT: STUART DEE / CORBIS

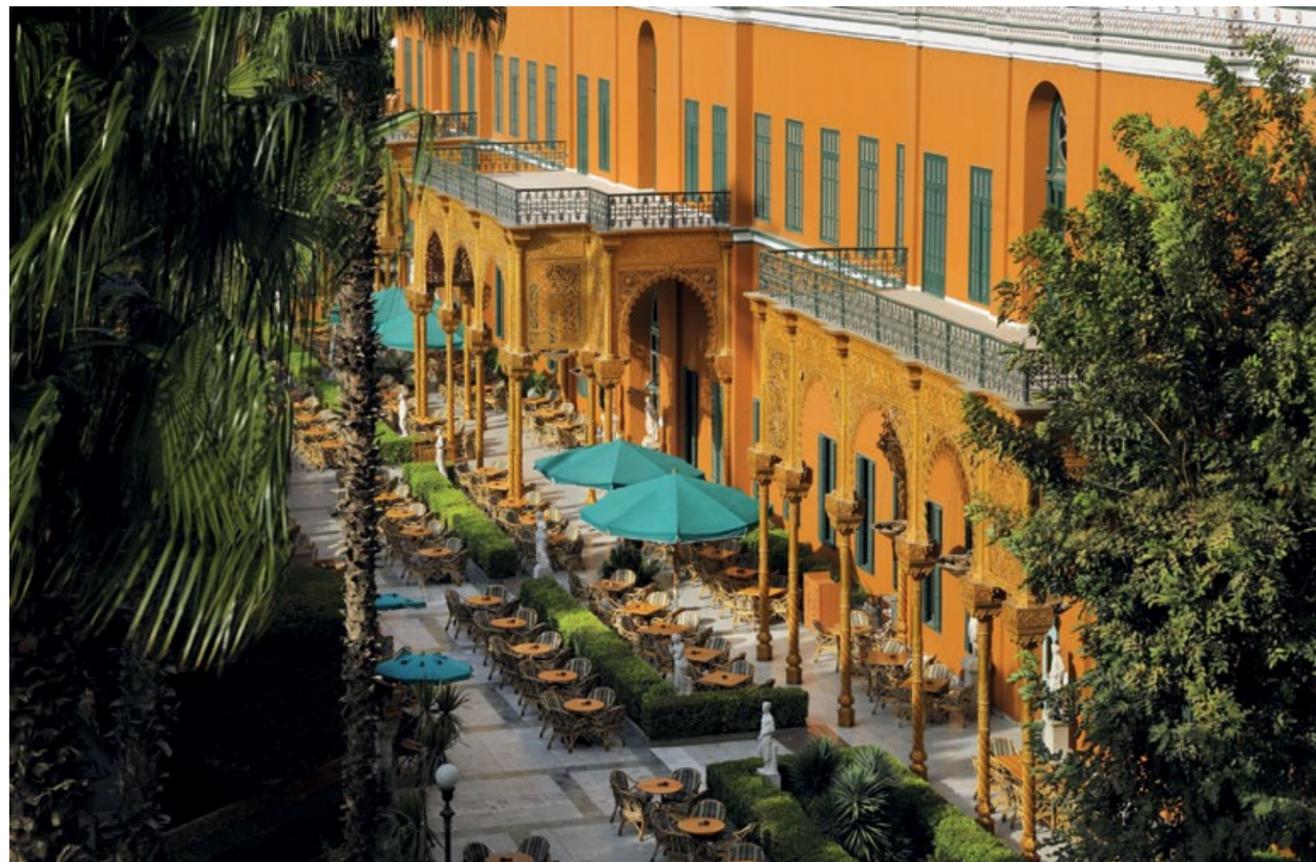


CLOCKWISE FROM THIS PICTURE: A SUNSET VIEW OF CAIRO; INSIDE THE EGYPTIAN MUSEUM OF ANTIQUITIES; THE BUILDING THAT HOUSES THE MUSEUM; KHAN EL-KHALILI; EL FISHAWY'S CAFE



style mezze including tabbouleh (parsley salad), *warek enab* (stuffed vine leaves) and *mubammara* (roasted red pepper and walnut spread).

Later that evening, we meet an old college friend, Moustapha, for a nightcap at Sequoia. Located on the banks of the Nile, the lounge is one of the many riverside haunts changing



*“ANCIENT EGYPTIANS NEVER BELIEVED IN DEATH. JUST LIFE AND AFTERLIFE”*

the tempo of the ancient capital. “The Nile is the nerve of life for Egyptians,” explains Moustapha as we settle into a low couch. Enclosed by a large tent, the open-air lounge has an all-white decor with dim wooden lanterns. Ibiza-esque music plays in the background as an eclectic crowd of locals mingles over cocktails and apple-scented shisha.

The next morning we’re up early to explore the Egyptian Museum of Antiquities. Boasting more than 100,000 artefacts, the salmon-coloured building houses the largest collection of Egyptian antiquities in the world. Before we enter, an elderly gentleman in a suit comes up to us and strikes up conversation: “Welcome to Egypt, where are you from?” he asks, introducing himself as Karim. I half expect him to be a tour guide but it turns out he’s a friendly engineer who wants to know if we’re enjoying his country. After sharing some tips on what to

see, he says, “You are lucky. The museum is not full. Before the revolution it was so packed you cannot even imagine.” The encounter is typical of post-revolutionary Egypt, where the people express deep pride in their country and extend a warmer-than-usual hospitality towards visitors. When we venture inside the museum’s main chamber, it feels as if we’ve snuck into an archaeological site after a dig. We stand alone before the mummies and sarcophagi of Egypt’s most storied kings and queens. Giant stone statues of muscular pharaohs with cone-shaped crowns tower above us. Bare fragments of ancient architecture lie scattered on the ground and artefacts are strewn haphazardly across the space. It’s nothing like the austere museums of the West filled with glass vitrines and barricades.

Upstairs, I stumble across a room lined with old wooden cabinets sealed with rusted padlocks. Resting inside are pieces of papyrus



imprinted with intricate hieroglyphs from the *Book of the Dead*. They are a collection of magical spells that ancient Egyptians believed would protect them in the afterlife and guarantee their immortality.



A VIEW OF CAIRO FROM THE CITADEL AND THE MOSQUE OF MUHAMMED ALI. OPPOSITE: THE COURTYARD AND AN INTERIOR SHOT OF THE CAIRO MARRIOTT HOTEL

MATT CHAMPLIN / GETTY IMAGES

“Ancient Egyptians never believed in death,” our guide Wael tells us the next day when we visit the Pyramids of Giza. “Just life and afterlife.” Staring up at the mammoth structures poking the sky, the effect is silencing. “You call it a pyramid or tomb but we call it *pr-aa* – the house of king in the next world,” he continues, explaining that pharaohs began construction of their burial monuments as soon as they came to power. We move on to see the sphinx stretched across the sand. Looking at the majestic creature, with a pharaoh’s head and lion’s body, it’s not the grandeur of this civilisation that comes to mind. Rather, it’s the way they lived, with one foot in two worlds, always looking ahead to life beyond death.

As we walk back to the car, conversation turns to the revolution and its impact on tourism. Asked what he thinks, Wael replies firmly: “Cairo is the same and the Egyptian people are the same. It’s only about hope. We are looking for the best.”

Our last two days are spent in Ain Sukhna, a town by the Red Sea where my friend is getting married. Known for its warmer climate, the resort is popular among Cairenes; their private villas stretch along the white-sand shores of the Gulf of Suez. The wedding is held in a remote beach hotel perched below the Attaka mountains.

In classic Egyptian fashion, the *zaffa* (wedding march) is a dramatic affair. As the bride makes her entrance with the

groom, a troupe of men in red tarboosh hats and *galabiyas* (traditional Egyptian robes) encircle the couple, dancing while playing tablas and tambourines. Soon everyone joins in. The event goes on for 12 hours with an Egyptian feast, lantern-lighting ceremony and people on the dance floor till the early hours of the morning. The next day at breakfast, one of the older guests jokes, “I think you guys had in mind to play Survivor.” While he was referring to the late-night dancing, his words make me think of Egypt as a whole. This is not the easiest time for the country, caught as it is in the throes of political change. Yet as my few short days in the capital have proven, the spirit of the Egyptian people remains as strong as ever. ■