

CAIRO:

A Blending Of The Ancient And The Modern

Are there adequate words to describe Cairo? Visitors are left with a kaleidoscope of colorful impressions and the urge to return time and time again.

Ancient and Modern—Side By Side

Cairo is the capital of Egypt. It has a population of approximately 16 million and it is still growing. Located at the apex of the Nile Delta, it is the crossroads where the cultures of Africa, Asia and Europe have met since the beginning of human history.

During the last 4,000 years there have been many Cairos. The ancient Egyptians called the city Or and the Greeks called it Heliopolis. The Cairo we know today is about one thousand years old, which is relatively modern in a country that dates back more than six thousand years.

It is the incongruous juxtaposition of ancient and modern that makes Cairo unforgettable. For example even New Yorkers, who believe they invented gridlock, are awed by Cairo's rush-hour traffic. Cars, pedestrians and camels all exuberantly vie for the right of way. The flow of traffic is directed by what seems to be an army of traffic officers. The scarcity of traffic lights and signs adds another dimension to driving in general.

Another example of the unpredictable mix of ancient and modern is drawn from Cairo's severe housing shortage. Those needing shelter have been very resourceful. Imagine seeing houses, built the ancient way with bricks made from Nile mud, perched atop once elegant apartment buildings whose design has a Napoleonic flavor.

Cairo's skyline offers still another example of ancient side by side with modern. From the Citadel, which is located on the slope of the Mukattam Hills, you can see all of Cairo—from the modern high-rise office buildings built in the last 30 years to mosques from the 9th century, to the remains of the 11th-century aqueduct built by Saladin to the Pyramids of Giza built nearly three thousand years before Christ.

The Citadel itself is in stark contrast to the skyscrapers of the 20th century. Started by Salah ed-Din (Saladin) in the 12th century as a fortress, it was constructed of alabaster that was taken from the small pyramids at Giza.

In the early 19th century, Muhammad Ali rebuilt much of the inner part of the Citadel and expanded it. He added the mosque which bears his name, the Jewel (Gawhara) Palace—destroyed by fire in the 1970's, the Mint and Archives which are located opposite El Bab el Gadid, The New Gate.

Walking up the drive to the Citadel, visitors pass the equivalent of modern "keep of the grass" signs, worded in a poetic manner that is surprising to the average Western tourist: "If you take care of me, I will please you" and "Egypt is a meadow, freedom is its scent, I am a part of it..."

Egyptian Antiquities Museum

A visit to Cairo must include that storehouse of treasures, the Egyptian Antiquities Museum, also known as the National Museum and the Cairo Museum. The 55-piece "Treasures of Tutankhamun" exhibit which created such excitement during its recent tour of the United States seems insignificant when compared to the complete display at the Cairo Museum.

One visit to this museum is not enough. There is so much crammed into limited space that very shortly, visitors run out of adjectives and begin simply to sigh in awe.

Churches and Mosques

Cairo is a city with innumerable churches and mosques.

Egypt was one of the first countries to embrace Christianity. The Christian period in Egypt began officially when St. Mark founded the Church of Egypt in the middle of the 1st century and continued until the Arab conquest in 7th century A.D. The Coptic Museum and next to it El Moual-

laza Church (The Church of the Holy Virgin) are well worth a visit. The church, which is thought to date back to the late 4th or early 5th century, was the patriarchal seat of the Bishop of Alexandria until the 11th century.

There are 650 mosques in Cairo which have been designated as monuments by the Islamic Monuments Preservation Society. From 641 A.D. to the present, each generation of Egyptians has built beautiful mosques to the glory of Islam. The El-Azhar Mosque (970-972 A.D.), the Ahmed Ibn Telun Mosque (876-879 A.D.) and the 19th century Muhammad Ali Mosque are but a sample of the many more to be seen.

Pyramids of Giza

The ancient Egyptians believed that they came from the East and that in death they would go to the West. For this reason, the tombs or pyramids of the ancient Egyptians were built on the West bank of the Nile. Those at Giza are about nine miles from present-day Cairo.

Although there are approximately 80 known pyramids in Egypt, the three at Giza are the most famous. They are also the ones that have suffered extensive damage. The largest of these, the pyramid built for Pharaoh Cheops, in its original state was 481 feet high and contained an estimated 1,300,000 blocks of stone, each weighing 2.5 tons. What we see today are the pyramids minus their alabaster facing. (Recall that the Muhammad Ali Mosque, for example, is built with alabaster taken from the pyramids). The limestone beneath is exposed to the corrosive effects of moisture and sand. Slowly, but surely, these ancient wonders are being reduced to sand. But the grandeur of what still remains makes the modern visitor feel reduced to "an ant in the sands of time."

Egyptians Are Conservative

When sightseeing in Cairo, it is important to remember that Egyptians are con-

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