



**nileGUIDE**

ALL YOU NEED TO PLAN YOUR PERFECT TRIP



## Off the beaten path Cairo: markets and monuments not even the locals know

### **Cairo, 3 Days**

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# Guide Description



**AUTHOR NOTE:** Cairo must be one of the most fascinating cities in the world: an exotic, chaotic assault on the senses, steeped in thousands of years of history.

Everybody knows about the Pyramids, the Egyptian Museum, and Khan al-Khalili, but there is so much more on offer. So much, in fact, that no single individual could know about all of the gems tucked away in Cairo's winding maze of alleyways. This is especially true of Islamic Cairo, easily the most enthralling, and confusing, area in the whole of the city.

This guide will take you well off the beaten path (though it will pass through some more familiar areas), into markets where most locals will never venture, and past monuments long forgotten by the majority of people.

The best way to explore the hidden nooks and crannies of Cairo is to walk, walk, and walk some more. Getting lost is mandatory. Wander down alleyways, enter interesting-looking buildings, and talk to the locals. This guide will provide you with suggestions for getting off the beaten track, but ultimately, you must let serendipity be your guide.

Note it goes without saying that you will be venturing in to traditional areas, so conservative clothing is a must! Ideally, you will also need to find a map of Cairo.

## Day 1 - Cairo

**DAY NOTE:** You are going to walk from Downtown, all the way to the Khan al-Khalili area, so make sure you get an early start, have sufficient sun protection, and carry a bottle of water.

Start in Downtown Cairo and walk to Midan al-'Ataba. There are loads of ways to do this, but here are a few possible routes.

You can walk from Midan Tahrir up Talaat Harb street. Go straight over Midan Talaat Harb (you will see the Yacoubian building to your right – setting for the modern novel and film of the same name) and keep going until you see 'Adli street on your right. Walk down 'Adli until you meet Midan al-Ubra. You will pass one of Cairo's few remaining synagogues: an imposing, gun-metal grey brick structure that manages to look both futuristic and gothic at the same time. Cross over Midan al-Ubra and walk under the overpass. Turn right at the Central Post Office, and you are in Midan al-'Ataba – check out the old-school fire engines parked here!

Alternatively, start in Midan Tahrir and walk east along Tahrir street until you get to Midan al-Gumhuriya and 'Abdin Palace. Keep an eye out along the way for al-Horeya on the left hand side: you might want to grab a beer there later! Turn left on to al-Gumhuriya street and keep walking straight until you meet Midan al-Ubra, or immediately leave al-Gumhuriya to the right and take 'Abd al-'Aziz street to Midan al-'Ataba. 'Abd al-'Aziz street is a manic street where lots of cut-price electronics are sold.

Pause for a second in Midan al-'Ataba: 'Ataba is one of the most exciting areas of Cairo – a series of interlinked markets where if you can name it, you can buy it, provided you can find it! It's worth exploring the area: see if you can find the Paper Market on al-Geish Street (which sells not only paper, but also dyed leather and art materials). If you are hungry, there are plenty of street food stalls in the area selling fuul, falafel and shwarma – pick somewhere that is doing a brisk trade.

You are now going to take al-Muski street all the way to Khan al-Khalili. You'll probably have to ask for directions to find the street, but that's fine: it's a famous street, and the locals will be more than willing to help. Al-Muski is a lively local market that starts out selling fireworks and household objects, and gradually transitions in to clothing and accessories, before phasing in to more touristy stuff towards the north of the street as you get closer to Khan al-Khalili.

Spend some time exploring the Khan: whilst most certainly on the beaten path, it's a unique experience, and the banter with the vendors is second to none. Grab a Turkish coffee and a shisha pipe in al-Fishawi coffee shop, and if you haven't eaten yet, take your lunch in Farahat or at the Egyptian Pancake House (again, it's hardly unknown, but does good quality traditional feteers nonetheless).

Spend the afternoon exploring the area south of al-Azhar Mosque. Start by walking behind the mosque and checking out the Wikalet al-Ghuri: a beautifully restored medieval merchants' hostel, that also hosts a free Sufi dancing show on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday evenings at 8 pm (get there early!) if you are up for it.

There is also an interesting fruit and veg market here, backing on to a maze of cramped alleys where dusty stalls sell even dustier books, and some craftsmen making mother of pearl boxes can be found. Don't get lost, though, because you want to head back past the mosque, and turn left on to al-Mu'izz li-Din-Allah street to head south.

At the start of the street is the rest of the al-Ghuri complex – a restored mosque and madrasa, both of which can be visited. Keep going down the street, which used to be known as Cairo's silk market. In the alleys to the right you will still find lots of carpet sellers, and even a small Tarboosh (Fez) souq.

This busy local market is a far cry from Khan al-Khalili, and is given over mainly to cheap clothes and household goods. Note all the bags of raw cotton dotting the street. Just before you reach Bab Zwayla (the southern medieval gate) you will see the ornamental Sabil (water fountain) of Mohamed Ali on the left.

You may want to turn right immediately after the gate, and walk the half a km or so to the Museum of Islamic Art. Make sure you double back and continue heading south, though, because you are about to enter Khyamiyya Street, or the Street of the Tentmakers. This is a fascinating covered market where craftsmen still make the traditional appliqué pavilions that are unique to Egypt. Although increasingly touristy, prices here are much lower than in the Khan, and the vendors are more than happy to chat about their work.

Keep going down the street, and it morphs into this incredible local food market: brightly coloured piles of fruits and vegetables fighting for space with buckets of offal, live chickens and rabbits. Make sure you keep your wits about you on this street: as crowded as it is, you still need to dodge the wheelbarrows, bikes, and even the occasional truck!

The market eventually spills out in to Mohamed 'Ali street, famous for its musical instruments. If you turn right on to Mohamed 'Ali street, you can walk up to Midan al-Khalq (and a second chance to visit the Museum of Islamic Art) and then head west via Sami al-Barudi street to get back to Downtown. Alternatively, you could just jump a taxi: you've certainly earned it!

In the evening, head down to Garden City. Just south of Downtown, Garden City is a pleasant maze of tranquil, tree-lined streets, and home to lots of government buildings and embassies. Take dinner either in Taboula (a quality Lebanese restaurant on Latin America street), or in Abu Shakra on Qasr al-Aini.

# Itinerary Overview

things to do  
restaurants  
hotels  
nightlife

You are a short walk away from Makan. Situated next to Saad Zaghloul metro station, this centre is devoted to preserving traditional Egyptian culture and arts, especially music. Every Wednesday at 9.00 pm the mixed male and female Mazaher ensemble perform the Zar: a traditional type of African and Middle Eastern music used in healing rituals. Make the most of the opportunity to witness, and help support, this endangered tradition.



## Abdeen Palace Museum

1001 Arabian knives



## Attaba

Crazy market area where if you can name it you can buy it



## al-Muski street

Fascinating local market leading away from Khan al-Khalili



## Khan el-Khalili Bazaar

Beating heart of Islamic Cairo



## Al-Fishawi Coffee Shop

The beating heart of Khan al-Khalili



## Al-Azhar Mosque

Egypt's Highest Islamic Authority



## Farahat

Traditional pigeon to coo over



## Egyptian pancake house

Traditional Egyptian pancakes in Khan al Khalili bazaar



## Wikalet al-Ghuri

Well-preserved merchant's hostel that hosts a Sufi dancing night



## Mosque-Madrassa of al Ghouri

An ode in marble to the twilight years of Mamluk rule



## Bab Zwayla

The imposing southern gate of Fatimid Cairo



## Museum of Islamic Art

Exquisite artefacts from all Islamic eras



## Taboula

Expensive Lebanese food in Garden City



## Abou Shakra

Where Locals Go For Local Cuisine



## Makan

Traditional folk and healing music

## Day 2 - Cairo

**DAY NOTE:** Today you are going to explore the area north of Khan al-Khalili. Either walk there, or take a taxi to al-Azhar. Head north this time up al-Mu'izz li-Din-Allah street, to the west of the market. This street takes you past a series of stalls selling household goods and shisha spare parts, as well as the garlic market.

There are a load of beautiful Islamic monuments along this street that have been restored. Make sure you pop in to the Beit al-Souhaymi – a good example of 17th Century Ottoman architecture. Also make sure you visit the elegant al-Hakim mosque at the north end of the road.

Take your lunch at Zizo's, a Cairo institution located opposite the northern gate. This spit and sawdust restaurant offers up the finest spicy sausage sandwiches in the whole of Egypt, no contest!

Once you've had your fill, continue east to the second of the northern gates, Bab al-Nasr. Head south down al-Gamaliya street towards Midan al-Hussein. About half-way down you will pass the Mosque of Gamal al-Din, and from here it's a short walk to al-Husayn Mosque.

Spend the afternoon exploring the Northern Cemetery, also known as the City of the Dead. It's a short walk east from Midan al-Husayn along al-Azhar Street: when you get to the top of the hill, walk under the overpass and enter the cemetery via any of the narrow roads that lead in amongst the tombs.

The City of the Dead is a cross between a slum and a huge cemetery, with the inhabitants living amongst the tombs. Many people live inside the tombs themselves - it was normal for tomb owners to 'employ' families as kind of caretakers – and, depending on exactly where you wander, it's common to see sights such as washing lines strung up between headstones.

The whole area is a real maze, and there's both a northern cemetery, where most of the inhabitants tend to live, and a southern cemetery, which is mainly old, spooky tombs. The area that's easiest to explore is the northern cemetery, and it's home to

# Itinerary Overview

things to do  
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a number of mosques and mausoleums that can be visited. The one you really want to find is the Mosque of Quaitbey, which is considered by many to be the finest Mamluk monument in Cairo. The best way to get there is to ask for directions, and if you've entered the area from al-Azhar street, you shouldn't be too far away.

Since the northern cemetery receives more visitors, most people feel comfortable enough walking round on their own, especially if you stick to the bigger streets. It's important to be dressed conservatively, though, and not to blatantly flash signs of your wealth. It might be worth offering a couple of friendly kids some baksheesh to act as your unofficial guides.

All this said, you should leave the City of the Dead well before dark. Retrace your steps to the main road, Salah Salim, and turn left. You'll see al-Azhar Park over the road on your right, which is a really pleasant place to wander round and relax for an hour or so. There are decent cafes and restaurants here if you need a spot of refreshment, and the people-watching is fantastic. Keep your eyes open for young lovers strolling amongst the flowers, coyly 'holding hands' by each grasping one end of a shared mobile phone! Al-Azhar park is one of the best places in Cairo to watch the sunset, as you hear the Call to Prayer from hundreds of mosques at the same time.

Grab some dinner somewhere Downtown or near your hotel, but remember you have an early start again tomorrow!



## Beit Al Souhaymi

Beautifully restored old Cairene house



## Hakim Mosque (Al)

Simple, yet stunning mosque built by an insane ruler



## Bab el-Futuh

One of medieval Cairo's northern gates



## Bab al-Nasr

One of medieval Cairo's northern gates



## Al Hussein Mosque

Egypt's most sacred mosque, housing grisly body part



## Zizo's

Fantastic spicy sausage sarnies



## Qarafa, City of the Dead

Where the living co-exist with the dead



## Mausoleum of Sultan Qaitbay

More Than Just A Tomb



## Al Azhar Park

Beautiful and inspiring park on former rubbish tip

## Day 3 - Cairo

**DAY NOTE:** Since the Friday Market burned down in June 2010, the best way to finish your Off the Beaten Path tour of Cairo is to explore Manshiyat Nasser. This is the area known as "Garbage City", the slum settlement where most of Cairo's garbage collectors, the Zabaleen, live.

Whilst it's possible to grab a taxi there and have a wander, visiting the rock cut cathedral and NGO's such as APE and Roh al-Shebab, you'll probably take more from your visit if you can find someone to show you around and explain exactly how the Zabaleen collect, sort, re-use and recycle the majority of Cairo's trash.

The Solar CITIES Urban Eco Tour is a walking tour through Manshiyat Nasser (and Darb al-Ahmar, in Islamic Cairo, if you so desire) on which you learn about a project where the local community has come together to build solar water heaters and biogas generators out of cheaply available recycled materials. It's led by Hanna Fathy, one of the Zabaleen, and so as well as learning about the project itself, you'll get a good insight into the daily lives of this Cairo community.

In the evening, try to eat dinner at Aboul Sid: it's not off the beaten track, but it does do some of the best traditional food in Cairo, in opulent surroundings. Note that because the restaurant is so popular, it's advisable to book in advance. Aboul Sid serves both alcohol and shisha pipes – so it's the perfect place to reflect on the amazing sights you have witnessed over the last few days, in the city known as Umm al-Dounia, the Mother of the World.



## Solar CITIES Urban Eco Tour

Sustainable technology in the slums of Cairo



## Abou el Sid

Traditional Egyptian cuisine, beer and shisha in Arabic splendour

# Day 1 - Cairo

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**contact:**

tel: +20 2 391 0042  
<http://www.touregypt.net/abdenpalace.htm>

**location:**

Moustafa Abdel Raziq Street  
Cairo 11728

**1 Abdeen Palace Museum**

**DESCRIPTION:** The stately grandeur of this palace owes to its construction in 1863 at a time when a worldwide cotton shortage meant huge revenues for Egyptian cotton exports. It served as a royal palace until the end of the monarchy in 1952, when it became the home of the president. In the 1980s, President Hosni Mubarak decided to restore the decaying building and turn it into a weapons and medals museum, a process that was interrupted by a major earthquake in 1992. Housing every conceivable means of killing an enemy, the weapons section is always a hit with young males. Its extensive collection of knives, guns and cannons, as well as ingenious combinations, is impressive and well-labelled. Another section is dedicated to a large, and somewhat monotonous, exhibit of medals and gifts presented to President Mubarak on various occasions, as well as medals given to members of the former royal family and Egyptian celebrities. No video cameras are allowed. © wcities.com

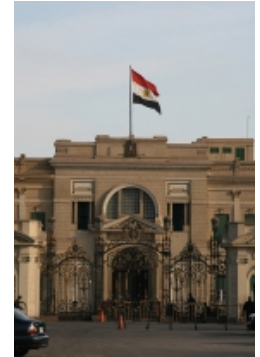


photo courtesy of zoonabar

location:  
Attaba  
Cairo

## 2 Attaba

### OUR LOCAL EXPERT SAYS:

You will get lost in Attaba, it's compulsory! Don't worry about it, just go with the flow!

**DESCRIPTION:** Attaba is really an area of Cairo rather than a market as such. It acts as a sort of transitional phase between Downtown and Islamic Cairo.

It's an insane collection of different streets and markets that all spread out from Midan al-Attaba. There are areas selling clothing, household goods, rip off watches and sunglasses, leather, paper and wood wholesale, religious pictures, food, electronics... you get the picture!

Attaba is the sort of area where if you can think of it, chances are you'll be able to buy it... as long as you can find it! It's a genuine assault on all the senses, and you just have to be prepared to dive in and get lost. But don't worry, no matter where you are you'll always be able to find a cab, and you'll never be too far away from somewhere selling refreshments either.

The best way to visit Attaba is to take the Metro. If you take the exit marked Azbakiya you can start your trip by visiting the used books market. It's also easy to walk from Downtown, or from Khan al-Khalili. © NileGuide



editor

location:  
al-Muski Street  
Cairo

## 3 al-Muski street

**DESCRIPTION:** Al-Muski Street is a long street that leads west from Khan al-Khalili in Islamic Cairo all the way to Ataba Square on the edge of Downtown.

It's an interesting area to explore because for the most part it's a proper local Cairo market, selling an assortment of clothes and shoes, blankets, and household goods. There are sections that sell toys, spices, and even fireworks. Towards the eastern edge, nearer to the Khan, you start to encounter stalls selling the same tourist kitsch as Khan al-Khalili itself, though you can often negotiate better prices.

Al-Muski is one of the most famous bazaars in Cairo, and is always heaving with people. Most parts of the street are narrow and cramped, with stalls spilling out onto the pavement and the wares hung overhead almost touching in the middle.

You'll probably have to do a fair amount of pushing and shoving to keep heading in the direction you want to, and keep an eye out for bicycles, handcarts and the occasional motorbike that crash through the fray without pause for anyone else.

Most people explore al-Muski by starting from Khan al-Khalili and heading west. An alternative is to take the Metro to Ataba station, exit and check out Azbakiya Book Market, and find your way from there to al-Muski. You'll probably have to ask the way, and it's kind of hard to see the entrance from al-Geish street,



editor

but everyone knows where it is and will be happy to point you in the right direction!

© NileGuide

**location:**

Off Hussein Square

Cairo 11211

## 4 Khan el-Khalili Bazaar

**DESCRIPTION:** Established in the 14th Century, and in constant use since then, Khan al-Khalili (or more simply, The Khan) is Egypt at its most intoxicating. Cairo has always been an important trade centre, and this tradition continues today in the bustling maze of alleys that forms Khan al-Khalili Bazaar. The Khan itself is relatively small, and is largely devoted to tourists. There are souvenirs here for every taste and budget: spices, jewellery, inlaid mother-of-pearl boxes and backgammon sets, water pipes, scarves, lamps, delicate perfume bottles (and the perfume to go in them)... you can even get yourself a singing, dancing camel!

Be warned, though, the traders here are black belts at haggling – so be firm, but maintain your sense of humour and enjoy the experience for what it is: the raucous, beating heart of commerce the old-school way.

When the banter gets too much, relax in al-Fishawi Coffee Shop with a water pipe and a strong Turkish coffee. This café has been open 24 hours a day since 1773, and Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz is said to have visited every day up to his death in 2006.

At the east end of the Khan is al-Hussein Square, home to the beautiful al-Hussein Mosque. The western end is bound by Muizz li-Din Allah Street. You can head north to Bab al-Futuh, past Islamic monuments such as al-Aqmar Mosque and Beit al-Souhaymi, or south towards Bab Zwayla and the Street of the Tentmakers. Leading west from Khan al-Khalili towards Ataba is al-Muski Street, a crazy local market that is well worth exploring.

To get to Khan al-Khalili Bazaar, take a taxi to al-Azhar Mosque and cross the road via the underpass. The more adventurous traveller can walk up to the bazaar from Ataba Metro station, along al-Muski.

© NileGuide



**location:**

El-Fishawi Alley

Cairo

## 5 Al-Fishawi Coffee Shop

**OUR LOCAL EXPERT SAYS:**

Come back to al-Fishawi at night, when all the tourists have gone home and the locals have come out to play.

**DESCRIPTION:** Located in the heart of Khan al-Khalili, al-Fishawi is Egypt's most famous, and most exciting coffee shop. Al-Fishawi has been open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week



for hundreds of years, and used to be a favourite haunt of artists and writers such as Nobel prize-winning author Naguib Mahfouz.

The so-called "cafe of mirrors" extends along the side of one of Khan al-Khalili's narrow alleyways, and has a gorgeous, carved wood (mashrabia) interior. These days, the sheer volume of people visiting al-Fishawi means rickety wooden tables and chairs spill out in to the alley itself, with the effervescent waiters fighting a constant battle to squeeze the extra bodies in somewhere. The atmosphere is chaotic, with a heady mix of tourists, locals, shop-keepers and trinket-sellers variously drinking, shouting, and pushing their way through the throng. Al-Fishawi serves the standard range of sodas, juices and hot drinks, as well as various flavours of shisha (water pipe). It's a great place to take a break from shopping in Khan al-Khalili - though don't expect it to be relaxing! © NileGuide

**contact:**

tel: +20 (0)2 59 3893  
fax: +20 (0)2 59 3893  
<http://www.alazhar.org/>

**location:**

Al-Azhar Street  
Cairo

**6 Al-Azhar Mosque**

**OUR LOCAL EXPERT SAYS:**

Remember to remove your shoes, behave modestly, and it's best to avoid prayer times.

**DESCRIPTION:** Al Azhar Mosque is one of the most beautiful mosques in Egypt, if not the whole world. It was established in 972 AD, the first Fatimid monument built in Cairo. Its name means "the most blooming", after one of the prophet Mohammed's daughters.

Al Azhar Mosque has been renovated and extended over the years, and it reflects a number of architectural styles. The large main courtyard is a particular highlight: 275 by 112 feet, made of glistening white marble, and home to hundreds of ancient columns. The five minarets are particularly elegant, and can be seen from much of Cairo. It is possible to climb some of the towers, though they are often locked and you should remember to give the porter a little something for his trouble.

Al Azhar Mosque is also arguably the most significant in the whole of the Sunni Muslim world: it is home to the second oldest University in the world, established in 975 AD, which specialises in all forms of Islamic studies. The scholars of the university are very well respected, and are often called upon to issue fatwas, or religious rulings.

Al Azhar Mosque is situated in the heart of Islamic Cairo, opposite Midan al-Husseini and Khan al-Khalili bazaar. It is best visited by taxi, though you could also walk up from Ataba Metro station. © NileGuide



**contact:**

tel: +20 (0)2 2592 6595

**location:**

126 Al-Azhar Street  
Cairo

**hours:**

11 am - 6 am

**7 Farahat**

**OUR LOCAL EXPERT SAYS:**

Don't be afraid to just rip the pigeons apart with your bare hands - that's how it's done at Farahat!

**DESCRIPTION:** Farahat is an unassuming, spit and sawdust Egyptian grill tucked away in an alley near Khan al-Khalili.

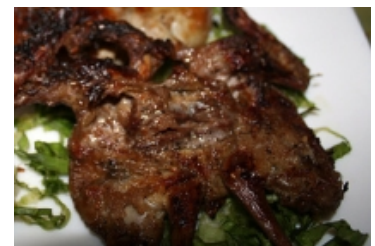


Photo by plusgood

Whilst their kofta and kebab are good, the real reason to visit Farahat is for the pigeon.

Pigeons have been eaten in Egypt since Pharaonic times, and are still specially raised in coups across the country. The pigeons at Farahat are gorgeous: fat and juicy, flavoursome, and stuffed with cracked wheat. There's really no other way to eat them than to rip the bird apart and suck the flesh off the bones - but don't worry, everyone else is doing the same thing! The food at Farahat comes served with rice, bread, and salads such as tahina, baba ghanoush, and mixed salad. You also get an oily soup served in a glass to begin with. Although there's a nominal charge for the salads, Farahat is pretty good value, with a pigeon costing 25 LE.

Unsurprisingly, the restaurant gets very busy, and since it's effectively just a few plastic chairs and table stuffed into an alley, you often have to wait to be seated. It's well worth it! Farahat is a great place to take a break from exploring the markets and monuments of Islamic Cairo. Al-Azhar Mosque and the Wikalet al-Ghouri (home to the Sufi dancing show) are just across the street, and it's easy from here to head south towards Bab Zwayla, or north towards Bab al-Futuh. © NileGuide

**contact:**  
tel: 2024505871

**location:**  
Midan Hussein  
Cairo

**hours:**  
Daily 11a-2a

## 8 Egyptian pancake house

### OUR LOCAL EXPERT SAYS:

Take a selection of savoury and sweet pancakes, and share!

**DESCRIPTION:** The Egyptian Pancake House is situated in on the edge Khan al-Khalili bazaar, and is a good place to eat in the area.

Egyptian pancakes (sometimes referred to as pizzas or pies) are actually known as feteers, and are sort of like a pizza topping stuffed inside a crepe. They are a perfect quick and tasty filler.

The Egyptian Pancake House offers various savoury and sweet feteers, and the best thing to do is to take a selection, and share. They aren't the best in Cairo, but they are authentic, and compared to a lot of the overpriced rubbish served up in the bazaar area, if you do need to eat, this is a good bet.

The spicy sausage feteer is particularly good, as is the honey, nuts and cream. Watch how the chef makes the pastry, slapping it on the counter and swinging it around his head to stretch the dough.

At the Egyptian Pancake House, you eat your feteers sitting at plastic tables and chairs balanced on the busy pavement, with a stream of vendors and the occasional tour bus parading past. This organised chaos, so typical of Cairo, is a big part of the fun! © NileGuide



editor

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fax: +20 (0)2 2285 4363  
(Tourist Information)

**location:**

Muhammad 'Abduh Street  
Cairo 11211

**9 Wikalet al-Ghouri**

**OUR LOCAL EXPERT SAYS:**

The free Sufi dancing show at the Wikala al-Ghouri is well worth attending, but make sure you arrive early to avoid disappointment.

**DESCRIPTION:** The Wikalet al-Ghouri, in Islamic Cairo, was built in the 16th Century by Qansuh al-Ghouri, the penultimate Mamluk sultan. A Wikala was a warehouse and merchants hostel, and the Wikalet al-Ghouri has been carefully restored. You have to pay 15 LE to enter.

It is very complete, with a huge open courtyard and a maze of stairs and passageways leading around the different floors. There is a marble fountain in the middle of the courtyard.

Many of the old rooms have been turned into miniature crafts centres, and it's possible to see workers producing leather ware, jewellery, paintings and so on. The combination of dark mashrabia windows on each room, and the striped marble building materials, is very effective; and although the Wikala al-Ghouri is very simple, it is deceptively beautiful.

Every Monday, Wednesday and Saturday evening there is a free Sufi dancing show held in the courtyard. The show begins at 8.30 pm, though if possible you should arrive when the doors open at 6.30 pm, to make sure you get in.

The show is incredible: the dancers spin in place, whipping their brightly coloured skirts into a mesmerising kaleidoscope of patterns. At the end of the dance, they simply walk off without a wobble, as if they haven't just been spinning around in a circle for ages. It's dizzying just watching them!

Wikalet al-Ghouri is just behind al-Azhar Mosque, pretty much opposite Khan al-Khalili and a short walk away from the Street of the Tentmakers.

© NileGuide



photo courtesy of kudumomo

**location:**

In front of al Ghouri  
Mausoleum  
Cairo 11728

**A Mosque-Madrassa of al Ghouri**

**DESCRIPTION:** Qansuh al-Ghouri was the penultimate Mamluk sultan of Egypt, and ruled for the first 16 years of the 16th Century. The area where the southern half of Muizz li-Din-Allah street meets al-Azhar street contains a number of monuments built by him, including the Wikala al-Ghouri, the Mausoleum al-Ghouri, and the Mosque-Madrassa al-Ghouri. The impressive Mosque-Madrassa al-Ghouri has been beautifully restored, its outside decorated with horizontal bands of dun and cream marble, Arabic stonework calligraphy and geometric patterns. The entrance to the Mosque-Madrassa al-Ghouri is an incredibly ornate niche doorway of black and white marble, that looks almost like a strange, fractal mountain range. The mosque itself is not that big, but feels light and spacious nonetheless, and has beautiful marble floors, ornately carved stone walls, and the black, white and dun coloured marble banding so typical of Mamluk architecture. The Mosque-Madrassa al-Ghouri also boasts some splendid stained glass arch windows, a gold coloured carved



wood ceiling, and even a large, gothic-looking iron chandelier. As with most mosques, for a little bit of baksheesh you are able to climb the minaret. A thoroughly recommended mosque! © NileGuide

**contact:**

tel: +20 (0)2 391 3454 (Tourist Information)

<http://www.touregypt.net/features/restories/zuwayla.htm>

**location:**

Sharia al-Muizz el-Din Allah Street  
Cairo

**B Bab Zwayla**

**DESCRIPTION:** Bab Zwayla is the only surviving southern gate of the medieval Fatimid city of al-Qahira. Built in the 10th Century, Bab Zwayla is as beautiful as it is imposing: a solid arch framed by chunky round turrets, with graceful minarets piercing the sky. It looks more like the entrance to a castle than to a city! The city wall to the west of the gate is still intact, and you can clearly see the zigzagging battlements with their finely carved decorations. During the Mamluk period, the area in front of Bab Zwayla was used for public gatherings, and dancers and snake charmers performed here. It was especially popular for the macabre entertainment of executions. For a small fee you can enter the western Bab Zwayla gate tower, and climb on to the roof and the city walls. You can even climb most of the way up one of the minarets, and get spectacular views out over Islamic Cairo and the Citadel. Just south of Bab Zwayla, is the Street of the Tentmakers. © NileGuide



**contact:**

tel: +20 2 390 9930

<http://www.eternalegypt.org/EternalEgyptWebsiteWeb/HomeeServlet>

**location:**

Port Said Street  
Cairo 11211

**C Museum of Islamic Art**

**DESCRIPTION:** The Museum of Islamic Art was first approved by Khedive Ismail in the mid 19th Century, though nothing happened until 1881 when a small collection was established in the then-ruined al-Hakim Mosque. Over the years the collection slowly grew, until in 1902 an entirely new museum was built on the outskirts of Islamic Cairo.

The Museum of Islamic Art is hosted in a beautiful neo-Mamluk building, which also contains the National Library. It is considered to be one of the most important museums of Islamic Art in the world, with thousands of artefacts on display, covering all Islamic eras. As well as exquisite ceramics, woodwork, metalwork and calligraphy, the Museum of Islamic Art contains some stunning examples of Iranian and Turkish carpets. Make sure to check out the delicately carved boxes for holding the Quran, and spare a few minutes to relax next to the fountain in the central courtyard.

The Museum of Islamic Art is situated in Bab el Khalq square, and is a short walk from both Mohammed Naguib and Ataba Metro stations. Abdeen Palace is also a few minutes walk away. © NileGuide



**contact:**

tel: +20 (0)2 2792 5261  
fax: +20 (0)2 3762 3534  
<http://www.taboula-eg.com/>

**location:**

1 Latin American Street  
Cairo

**hours:**

Daily noon-2a

**D Taboula**

**OUR LOCAL EXPERT SAYS:**

Taboula gets very busy, so it's advisable to book in advance.

**DESCRIPTION:** Taboula is a fancy Lebanese restaurant tucked away down a leafy side street in Garden City. Although quite large, the tables are packed together, and the restaurant can feel quite stuffy. It is nicely decorated though, and feels quite classy.

Taboula specialises in Lebanese food, which means lots of tasty mezze and grills. The food can be a bit hit and miss: some of the mezze in particular are delicious, whereas others are merely average. The classics, such as hummus and tabouleh, are very good, but the mussels leave a lot to be desired. The Fattah dishes are particularly good. Alcohol and shisha pipes are both served at Taboula, and it is a pleasant enough space to enjoy a lingering meal, but the staff are not always that friendly.

There is a take-away and delivery service as well.

If you fancy a more cheap and cheerful Middle Eastern dining experience, check out nearby Abou Shakra.

© NileGuide



Photo courtesy of Taboula

**contact:**

tel: 20 (0)2 2531 6111, +20  
(0)2 3531 6222  
fax: +20 (0)2 2531 6222  
<http://www.aboushakra.com/>

**location:**

69 Kasr El Einy Street  
Cairo

**hours:**

9a-1a

**E Abou Shakra**

**OUR LOCAL EXPERT SAYS:**

If you don't fancy eating in, the restaurant has a take-away and delivery service

**DESCRIPTION:** A Cairo landmark, this fancy kebab house has been serving locals for over 50 years. There are other branches in Heliopolis and Mohandiseen. This conservative Muslim restaurant is done up in marble and alabaster. Seating is a little tight and the staff can be slow, but customers are always guaranteed an authentic Egyptian experience. The main specialty here is kebabs, with prices calculated per kilo of meat and a host of salads and dips to choose from. Pigeon, chicken and specialty beef dishes are also on the menu. The Egyptian desserts served here are heavenly, with top honors going to the Om Ali (flakey dough with raisins and nuts soaked in sugar and milk). © wcities.com



**contact:**

tel: +20 (0)2 2792 0878  
http://www.egyptmusic.org/

**location:**

1 Saad Zaghloul St.  
Cairo 11461

**F Mekan**

**OUR LOCAL EXPERT SAYS:**

Mekan is a small venue, and can get quite busy, so get there early to get a decent seat

**DESCRIPTION:** Mekan is a small venue just south of Downtown Cairo, in an area known as Mounira. It is part of the Egyptian Centre for Culture and Art (ECCA), that aims to record, preserve and present traditional&nbsp;African music in Egypt, making it available to a wider audience.

Mekan is famous for its Zar performances every Wednesday. Zar was traditionally a healing ceremony, in which the participants use powerful, arrhythmic drumming and chanting to exorcise demons and drive out disease. Women play an important role in this process.

The Mazaher ensemble that perform at Mekan are some of the last remaining Zar practitioners in Egypt, and their style is drawn from different forms of Zar music. They are consummate performers, and the atmosphere is a curious mix of the intimate, the light-hearted, and the intense.

As well as the Mazaher ensemble, Mekan holds a night every Tuesday called Nass Mekan (or "People of Mekan"). This is a fascinating blend of folk music, including gypsy music from the Egyptian delta, musical styles inspired by the Zar, and Sudanese singers and musicians.

Whatever you think of the authenticity of performing a "healing ritual", Mekan is definitely a memorable night out, and well worth a visit if you get the chance.

It's very easy to get to, just around the corner from Saad Zaghloul metro station. If you fancy a bite to eat, there are a number of restaurants near by, such as Abou Shakra, or Taboula in Garden City.



photo courtesy of moftasa

# Day 2 - Cairo

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## QUICK NOTE

**DAY NOTE:** Today you are going to explore the area north of Khan al-Khalili. Either walk there, or take a taxi to al-Azhar. Head north this time up al-Mu'izz li-Din-Allah street, to the west of the market. This street takes you past a series of stalls selling household goods and shisha spare parts, as well as the garlic market.

There are a load of beautiful Islamic monuments along this street that have been restored. Make sure you pop in to the Beit al-Souhaymi – a good example of 17th Century Ottoman architecture. Also make sure you visit the elegant al-Hakim mosque at the north end of the road.

Take your lunch at Zizo's, a Cairo institution located opposite the northern gate. This spit and sawdust restaurant offers up the finest spicy sausage sandwiches in the whole of Egypt, no contest!

Once you've had your fill, continue east to the second of the northern gates, Bab al-Nasr. Head south down al-Gamaliya street towards Midan al-Hussein. About half-way down you will pass the Mosque of Gamal al-Din, and from here it's a short walk to al-Husayn Mosque.

Spend the afternoon exploring the Northern Cemetery, also known as the City of the Dead. It's a short walk east from Midan al-Husayn along al-Azhar Street: when you get to the top of the hill, walk under the overpass and enter the cemetery via any of the narrow roads that lead in amongst the tombs.

The City of the Dead is a cross between a slum and a huge cemetery, with the inhabitants living amongst the tombs. Many people live inside the tombs themselves - it was normal for tomb owners to 'employ' families as kind of caretakers – and, depending on exactly where you wander, it's common to see sights such as washing lines strung up between headstones.

The whole area is a real maze, and there's both a northern cemetery, where most of the inhabitants tend to live, and a southern cemetery, which is mainly old, spooky tombs. The area that's easiest to explore is the northern cemetery, and it's home to a number of mosques and mausoleums that can be visited. The one you really want to find is the Mosque of Quaitbey, which is considered by many to be the finest Mamluk monument in Cairo. The best way to get there is to ask for directions, and if you've entered the area from al-Azhar street, you shouldn't be too far away.

Since the northern cemetery receives more visitors, most people feel comfortable enough walking round on their own, especially if you stick to the bigger streets. It's important to be dressed conservatively, though, and not to blatantly flash signs of your wealth. It might be worth offering a couple of friendly kids some baksheesh to act as your unofficial guides.

All this said, you should leave the City of the Dead well before dark. Retrace your steps to the main road, Salah Salim, and turn left. You'll see al-Azhar Park over the road on your right, which is a really pleasant place to wander round and relax for an hour or so. There are decent cafes and restaurants here if you need a spot of refreshment, and the people-watching is fantastic. Keep your eyes open for young lovers strolling amongst the flowers, coyly 'holding hands' by each grasping one end of a shared mobile phone! Al-Azhar park is one of the best places in Cairo to watch the sunset, as you hear the Call to Prayer from hundreds of mosques at the same time.

Grab some dinner somewhere Downtown or near your hotel, but remember you have an early start again tomorrow!

**contact:**

tel: +20 2 285 4509  
<http://www.egypt.travel/index.php>

**location:**

Darb al-Asfar Street  
Cairo

**1 Beit Al Souhaymi**

**DESCRIPTION:** Beit al-Souhaymi is part of the lovingly restored Darb al-Asfar district of Islamic Cairo, situated down an alleyway just past al-Aqmar Mosque. Beit al-Souhaymi is a typical example of the family mansions built in Cairo from the Mamluk period all the way to the 19th Century. It costs 30 LE to enter, but is well worth it. You emerge in to a pretty, tree lined open courtyard complete with singing birds, around which the rest of the house is based. In fact, the Beit al-Souhaymi complex actually merges with two other houses to the west. The whole area is a maze of stairs, passageways and hidden rooms, all of which have been restored, and many of which are wonderfully decorated. Spend some time poking around the nooks and crannies, and you will find rooms with colourful marble mosaic floors, vividly painted wooden ceilings, exquisite mashrabia lattice work (to allow the women to observe the goings on in the house without being seen), and ornate mother of pearl chests that have clearly been the inspiration behind many of the souvenirs sold in Khan al-Khalili. You could easily get lost for an hour or two exploring Beit al-Souhaymi; just make sure you finish your visit in the second, even greener, open courtyard, and take a rest before rejoining the hustle and bustle of the outside world! © NileGuide



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[http://www.egypt.travel/uploads/images/egypt\\_places\\_to\\_visit\\_cairo\\_VI0064.jpg](http://www.egypt.travel/uploads/images/egypt_places_to_visit_cairo_VI0064.jpg)

**location:**

Al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah Street  
Cairo

**2 Hakim Mosque (Al)**

**DESCRIPTION:** Al-Hakim Mosque was built in the 11th Century by al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, one of Egypt's most insane, and sadistic rulers. He persecuted Christians, Jews, merchants and women, banned or destroyed everything that annoyed him (including all the city's dogs), and would stand on the heads of his enemies whilst one of his slaves sodomised them. He even had a group of women boiled alive in public. It's ironic, therefore, that the mosque which bears his name is so beautiful! Joining the northern walls, al-Hakim Mosque looks quite plain and solid from the outside, with square towers and an odd style of minaret. There is some delicate Arabic stone filigree work on the arches outside. Inside, however, is a huge open courtyard of blinding white/cream marble, with a deep red marble fountain with white veins running through it. It's simple, but actually quite moving. The main prayer hall still has some original wooden beams, but much of the rest of al-Hakim Mosque was restored in 1980 by a group of Shi'ite Muslims from Brunei. The main mihrab is of pale marble, with beautiful gold trim and calligraphy. You used to be able to climb on to the city walls from al-Hakim Mosque, but that has been officially banned. That does not mean, however, that you can't ask the caretakers: for a little baksheesh, they may find that they can discover the necessary keys after all. © NileGuide



**contact:**

tel: +20 (0)2 391 3454 (Tourist Information)  
<http://www.touregypt.net/babfutuh.htm>

**location:**

El Muizz El Din Allah Street  
Cairo

**3 Bab el-Futuh**

**DESCRIPTION:** In 1087 AD the original mud brick walls of al-Qahira were rebuilt from stone, to protect the city from the menace of the Turks. This explains why Bab al-Futuh, one of the two remaining north gates, looks more like it belongs at the entrance of a castle than a city. Joining with the city walls and al-Hakim Mosque, Bab al-Futuh consists of two huge rounded castle-like turrets, bristling with ramparts and defensive arrow-slits, and decorated with a finely carved floral arch. Traditionally, the caravans returning from the annual pilgrimage to Mecca would always enter the city through Bab al-Futuh, welcomed by huge crowds of people that had been unable to make the journey themselves. Interestingly, Bab al-Futuh was actually built from masonry scavenged from ancient Egyptian Memphis, as the carvings on some stones that comprise the building testify. © NileGuide



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**contact:**

tel: +20 (0)2 285 4509 (Tourist Information)  
fax: +20 (0)2 285 4363 (Tourist Information)  
<http://www.touregypt.net/babnasr.htm>

**location:**

Off Bab al-Wazir Street  
Cairo

**4 Bab al-Nasr**

**DESCRIPTION:** The second of Fatimid Cairo's northern gates, Bab al-Nasr (Gate of Victory) was built in 1087 AD when the old mud-brick city walls were upgraded to stone. Some of the stones used in the building were stolen from the ancient Egyptian city of Memphis. Bab al-Nasr looks more like a castle gate than the entrance to a city, with huge blocky towers and defensive fortifications. The doorway is surmounted by a carved stone arch, decorated with calligraphy. The gate's inscription reads "There is no God but Allah; Mohammed is his prophet". Being Shia Muslims, the Fatimids also added the controversial inscription "And Ali is the deputy of God". There is actually a huge cemetery opposite Bab al-Nasr, though there are so many homes built over it that you can no longer really see the tombs. Bab al-Nasr leads on to al-Gamaliyya street, which can be followed all the way down to Khan al-Khalili. © NileGuide

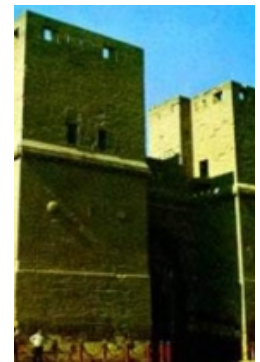


Photo courtesy of Bab al-Nasr

**contact:**

tel: +20 (0)2 285 4509 (Tourist Information)  
fax: +20 (0)2 285 4363 (Tourist Information)

**location:**

El-Hussein Square  
Cairo

**5 Al Hussein Mosque**

**DESCRIPTION:** Al-Hussein Mosque is one of the most beautiful Cairo mosques. Situated in Midan al-Hussein, next to Khan al-Khalili, al-Hussein Mosque is named after the Prophet's grandson, who was killed by the Umayyads in Iraq in 680 AD during a battle over the succession of the Caliphate. It was this conflict that caused the schism in Islam that gave rise to the two main subdivisions of Sunni and Shia: with the Sunnis recognising the legitimacy of the Umayyad claim, and the Shi'ites maintaining that only a blood relative of Mohammed could be the Caliph. Hussein is revered as a martyr in the Shi'ite world, and although Egypt is predominantly Sunni Muslim, Hussein is still regarded as a saint here too. His head is buried inside al-Hussein Mosque. Technically, the mosque is closed to non-Muslims, though the caretakers will sometimes let you in if you appear respectful enough. Al-Hussein Mosque is elegant and restrained: a huge prayer hall with hundreds of light grey marble pillars, tasteful hanging lamps and chandeliers, and high vaulted ceilings. The mihrab is gorgeous: white, blue, grey and black marble arranged in to



traditional geometric designs. The shrine to Hussein is a huge engraved silver affair surrounded by shining white marble, and offset by soft, almost otherworldly green lighting. You will often see pilgrims from all around the Muslim world at Hussein's shrine, walking slowly around it, chanting. © NileGuide

**contact:**  
tel: 2025926530

**location:**  
1 Midan Bab al Futuh  
Cairo

**hours:**  
24 hr

## 6 Zizo's

### OUR LOCAL EXPERT SAYS:

Make sure to leave room for dessert: halawa and cream sandwiches are another Zizo speciality

**DESCRIPTION:** Zizo's, situated opposite one of the north gates (Bab al Futuh) of Islamic Cairo, is one of the city's best kept secrets.

Founded by colourful owner Abdel-Aziz Mustafa Hamzah (aka Zizo) in the 60's, Zizo's specialises in spicy sogoq (beef sausage) sandwiches, Alexandria style. The sandwiches are incredibly tasty, and dirt cheap, though be warned that they have quite a kick. Zizo's is also renowned for the quality of its offal, and the brains are particularly well regarded. For dessert, grab a halawa bil eshta sandwich (halawa is a sweet made of sesame paste and sugar, and eshta is cream) for the ultimate sugar rush!

Zizo himself still runs this tiny, spit and sawdust-type restaurant, as well as making the amazing pickles that accompany his food. He's a very friendly character, that loves to welcome and chat with his guests.

Zizo's is very near Khan el Khalili, so is the perfect place to refuel after a spot of shopping, perhaps before heading to the nearby cities of the dead. © NileGuide



editor

**contact:**  
tel: +20 2 285 4509

**location:**  
East of Cairo, Foot of  
Moqattam Cliff  
Cairo

## 7 Qarafa, City of the Dead

### OUR LOCAL EXPERT SAYS:

The City of the Dead is a very poor and conservative area, so make sure you are dressed appropriately, don't flash your wealth, and ensure you ask permission before taking photos of people.

**DESCRIPTION:** Qarafa, or the City of the Dead, is situated in the east of Islamic Cairo, stretching from the foot of the Citadel to the Muqattam Hills. The City of the Dead is actually two cemeteries, dating back to Mamluk times: a southern cemetery, and a northern cemetery. Traditionally, every family in Cairo would maintain some sort of mausoleum, somewhere in Cairo, where family members were buried. To this day, the cemeteries are still in use. As well as for the dead, the cemeteries provide homes for the living. Families live within the mausoleums. Some have been there for generations, and look after the tombs for their owners. Others are more recent,



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tolerated squatters, many of whom were displaced from the canal zone during the 1967 war. No-one knows for sure how many people live in the City of the Dead, though it's probably in the region of half a million. It is possible to visit the cemeteries. The southern cemetery is only sparsely inhabited, though it is an eerily atmospheric place to wander around. Some of the tombs are hundreds of years old; others are more recent. Some years back, the area had a reputation as the home of thieves and drug dealers, and you should certainly avoid the southern cemetery at night. The northern cemetery of the City of the Dead is where most of the people live. It feels more like a peaceful, though poor residential area. There are even a handful of shops and cafes, and many of the inhabitants live quite normal lives. The northern cemetery is home to some of Cairo's most beautiful Mamluk monuments, such as the Mausoleums of Sultan Qaitbey and Sultan Barquq. It's best to visit the area with the help of a guide, though it is possible to do on your own. Don't stray too far from the main paths, and it's best not to linger long past sunset. © NileGuide

**contact:**

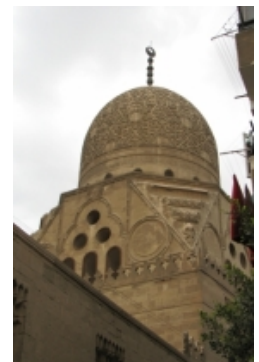
tel: +20 2 285 4509  
<http://www.egypt.travel/index.php>

**location:**

East of Cairo, Foot of Moqattam Cliff  
Cairo

**8 Mausoleum of Sultan Qaitbay**

**DESCRIPTION:** Mausoleum of Sultan Qaitbay was built between 1472-74. It contains the mausoleum and the madrasa named after Sultan Qaitbay. Located in the northern part of Qarafa, City of the Dead, it is famous for its architecture and intricate design work. This complex has nine buildings including the madrasa, mosque and mausoleum. The mosque is the most beautiful with intricate designs made on the dome. The mausoleum has the tomb of Qaitbay made in wood with inlay work done in ivory and other woods. It also has a wooden holder for The Koran and two stones on which, according to legend, The Prophet Mohammad stood on. Visitors are requested to dress appropriately while visiting mosques and mausoleums. © wcities.com



wcities

**contact:**

tel: +20 2 510 3868 / +20 2 510 7378  
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<http://www.alazharpark.com/>

**location:**

Salah Salem Street  
Cairo 11562

**9 Al Azhar Park**

**DESCRIPTION:** Covering an area of about 30 hectares, al-Azhar Park is the largest expanse of green in Cairo. Established by the Aga Khan Trust For Culture in 1984, it was built over the top of a huge pile of rubble that had been turned in to a rubbish tip. Don't let this put you off: al-Azhar Park is a peaceful oasis on the edge of the chaos that is Islamic Cairo. Paths meander through idyllic gardens, and you are never far from one of the many water features. It's a great place to relax, and many people take a picnic. If you'd rather be waited upon, there are four restaurant/cafes located in the grounds. Because al-Azhar Park is on a hill, you get amazing views all over Cairo. On a clear day you can even see the Pyramids!  
As with much of Cairo, the best bit is people-watching: old men reminiscing on benches, children playing leapfrog, and daring young lovers holding hands as they stroll through their own little world. If history is your thing, then check out the 800 year-old Ayyubid wall that has been partially restored. If music is more



your scene, then ask at the information desk about up-and-coming concerts; many of them are free!  
Al-Azhar Park is a perfect place to chill out after you've tackled some of the nearby sights of Islamic Cairo, such as Khan al-Khalili or the Citadel. You can get here by taxi, or even walk up from Khan al-Khalili. © NileGuide

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# Day 3 - Cairo

## QUICK NOTE

**DAY NOTE:** Since the Friday Market burned down in June 2010, the best way to finish your Off the Beaten Path tour of Cairo is to explore Manshiyat Nasser. This is the area known as “Garbage City”, the slum settlement where most of Cairo’s garbage collectors, the Zabaleen, live.

Whilst it’s possible to grab a taxi there and have a wander, visiting the rock cut cathedral and NGO’s such as APE and Roh al-Shebab, you’ll probably take more from your visit if you can find someone to show you around and explain exactly how the Zabaleen collect, sort, re-use and recycle the majority of Cairo’s trash.

The Solar CITIES Urban Eco Tour is a walking tour through Manshiyat Nasser (and Darb al-Ahmar, in Islamic Cairo, if you so desire) on which you learn about a project where the local community has come together to build solar water heaters and biogas generators out of cheaply available recycled materials. It’s led by Hanna Fathy, one of the Zabaleen, and so as well as learning about the project itself, you’ll get a good insight into the daily lives of this Cairo community.

In the evening, try to eat dinner at Aboul Sid: it’s not off the beaten track, but it does do some of the best traditional food in Cairo, in opulent surroundings. Note that because the restaurant is so popular, it’s advisable to book in advance. Aboul Sid serves both alcohol and shisha pipes – so it’s the perfect place to reflect on the amazing sights you have witnessed over the last few days, in the city known as Umm al-Dounia, the Mother of the World.

### contact:

tel: +2 012 182 7315  
<http://solarcities.blogspot.com/>

### location:

Fangari Hindi st, Manshiyat Nasser, Mogamma Zabaleen Cairo

## Solar CITIES Urban Eco Tour

### OUR LOCAL EXPERT SAYS:

Wear clothes you don't mind getting mucky on the Solar CITIES Urban Eco Tour, especially if you are visiting the Zabaleen; it's also best to wear shoes, not flip-flops.

**DESCRIPTION:** Since 2005, the Solar CITIES project has been helping poor communities in Darb al-Ahmar and Manshiyat Nasser ("Garbage City") to build solar water heaters and biogas generators out of low cost, locally available materials. The project has received numerous grants, and has been recognised by National Geographic.

It is based on a participatory, bottom-up approach to development, which taps into the collective intelligence and expertise that is already embedded within the community. On the Solar CITIES Urban Eco Tour you will meet Hanna Fathy, a young man from the Zabaleen community of garbage collectors, who has been involved with the project since the beginning. He will guide you through the communities with which Solar CITIES works, where you can meet locals that have benefitted from the project, and witness first-hand the impact it is having.

The Solar CITIES Urban Eco Tour is divided into two halves, reflecting the two communities the project works with. The Darb al-Ahmar portion will begin at Bab Zwayla. You will be able to explore the Street of the Tentmakers, before walking



through the streets of this fascinating area of Islamic Cairo, stopping to visit some of the houses that have solar water heaters and biogas generators installed. There will also be the chance to visit the Aga Khan Foundation, and see their rooftop garden. The tour will finish in al-Azhar Park – former rubbish tip and now one of Cairo's most inspiring green spaces – where you can grab some lunch. More specifically, Hussein El-Farag from Solar CITIES in Darb Al Ahmar, will give urban Eco-Tours of his family's historic Islamic neighborhood at the base of Al Azhar park. As Hanna Fathy's colleague on the other side of the City of the Dead, Hussein also shows the solar hot water and biogas systems that he and Hanna and Solar CITIES have built in his neighborhood, ending the tour with biogas heated tea on his roof in sight of the ancient mosque. Hussein's tour is the Islamic equivalent of the Coptic Christian Solar CITIES tour that Hanna gives outlined below.

The Manshiyat Nasser section of the Solar CITIES Urban Eco Tour will explore Garbage City, where the Zabaleen live. The Zabaleen are a Christian community that are responsible for collecting and recycling, by hand, most of Cairo's rubbish. You will have the chance to learn more about this process, and visit families that are involved in this work. You will also visit Hanna's house, to see the solar water heater and biogas generator that he has installed. You can visit some of the other NGO's that are working with the community, such as the APE and Roh al-Shabab, and to visit the Coptic monastery, which offers spectacular views over the area.

The Solar CITIES Urban Eco Tour is most suitable for people who have an interest in urban planning, development, or sustainable technology issues. A word of warning – you are visiting deprived areas of Cairo, and so may see things that you are not that comfortable with. Manshiyat Nasser, in particular, is a real eye-opener, with garbage literally everywhere. Having said that, seeing the inspirational work that Solar CITIES is doing is a real privilege, and could easily be the most memorable and meaningful part of your trip to Cairo.

Each tour will take around 4 hours, and costs 100 LE per person, or 150 LE if you do both tours. You can get a discount if you book as a group, but bear in mind Hanna can't take more than 5 people at once. To make sure he is available, you should book a week in advance.

Finally, these tours are very flexible, and you can get in touch with Hanna to discuss your own particular requirements. © NileGuide

**contact:**

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**location:**

157, 26th of July Street, just down from Diwan book store

**1 Abou el Sid**

**OUR LOCAL EXPERT SAYS:**

Finding shisha and beer together in a restaurant is rare, so make the most of it

**DESCRIPTION:** Abou el Sid, located on Zamalek, offers excellent, authentic Egyptian cuisine in very atmospheric surroundings. Décor is traditional Arabesque, heavy on the

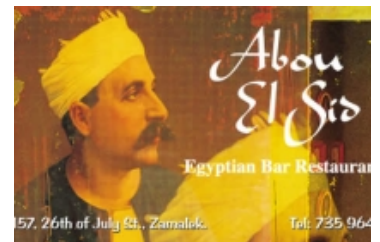


Photo courtesy of Abou el Sid

Cairo

hours:

12p-2a daily

mashrabiyya wooden panelling, but the atmosphere is lively and down to earth. A word of warning though - the staff can be incredibly rude, and the service isn't always great.

Don't let this put you off though, because Abou el Sid is an excellent place to share a selection of mouth-watering mezzes, and offers a wide range of traditional Egyptian mains. Try the Rabbit with Molokheiya for a real taste of rural Egypt, their old-school fish Sayadeya, or opt for Egypt's national dish, Koshary (a mix of pasta, lentils, fried onions and tomato sauce). Abou el Sid also serves a range of alcohol, and Egyptian water pipes (shishas).

Abou el Sid gets very busy, so it's advisable to book in advance. If you can't get a table, L'Aubergine and La Bodega are near by, or you could try the Abou el Sid branches in Mohandiseen, Maadi or City Stars. © NileGuide

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# Cairo Snapshot

## Local Info

Delicious chaos. There's no better way to sum up the exotic, intoxicating and infuriating nature of Cairo, the largest city in Africa and the Middle East. Because Cairo is not just about its Pharaonic heritage, even if it does boast the last remaining Wonder of the Ancient World. Cairo is a sprawling mass of humanity in which different worlds collide, and the past rubs shoulders with the present.

Soaring Islamic architecture peers down on bustling bazaars, where young boys slip through the throngs delivering tea to the haggle-happy masses. Serene Coptic churches huddle together next to the remains of the Roman fortress.

Donkey carts battle taxis for supremacy over the streets. The traffic either moves at breakneck speed, or it doesn't move at all. Rich fast-food suburbia snuggles up to poorer, more baladi areas, where workers eat fuul in the street.

Old men in galabiyas sit smoking shisha and playing backgammon in local cafés. The rattle-slap of the pieces and the hubble-bubble of their pipes merge with the cacophony of horns, laughter and blaring Arabic pop. The sweet smells of fruit tobacco and spices mingle, seasoning the traffic fumes.

And cutting through it all, five times a day, is the Call to Prayer, ethereal and mesmerising. But older even than Cairo, the Nile flows on, dividing the city in two.

How it all breaks down

Cairo is not really one city. Its story stretches back for thousands of years, from ancient Egyptian times through to the present day. The current Arabic name for Cairo is al-Qahirah, which can be translated as "The Victorious", or "The Conqueror." Egyptians also refer to Cairo as Masr, which means Egypt.

The city is huge, and is divided into numerous neighbourhoods. Here are some of the most important:

Downtown Cairo is the centre of the modern city, a mish-mash of commerce and housing. Here you can visit the wonders of the Egyptian Museum, including the treasures of Tutankhamen.

There are also a few art galleries, and numerous restaurants, cafes and bars.

Towards the east, Downtown shades in to the area known loosely as Islamic Cairo. This is where you find the liveliest markets, such as Ataba, and of course Khan al-Khalili, as well as the most majestic Islamic architecture. One of the most famous Cairo mosques is al-Azhar Mosque, arguably the most important in the Sunni Muslim world. At the edge of Islamic Cairo, on top of the Muqattam Hills, the Citadel stands watch over Cairo, as it has done for centuries.

Out towards the east and the north-east are the neighbourhoods of Nasr City and Heliopolis. Virtually self-contained cities, there is little of interest here to the casual visitor, though there are lots of hotels in Heliopolis.

South of Downtown Cairo, stretching along the Corniche, are the hotels and embassies of Garden City. Below this is Old Cairo, home to the Coptic Christian quarter, and one of the most picturesque parts of the city. Even further south is the expat enclave of Maadi, one of the best places in Cairo to do a felucca ride. A way east of Maadi, you can find the New Cairo development, a partial shelter from the hurly burly of the centre.

Al-Manyal and Zamalek are two large islands in the centre of the city, around which the Nile flows. Zamalek is a blend of the posh and the westernised, with good shopping, lots of restaurants and nightlife, and some swanky hotels.

West of the Nile, in what is really Giza rather than Cairo, are the residential neighbourhoods of Imbaba, Mohandiseen, Agouza, Dokki and Giza. With a number of hotels and restaurants, many tourists choose to stay in Dokki.

The other alternative is to head further west, to where Giza crashes into the ancient past. The city literally spreads all the way to the edge of the Pyramids, and there are lots of hotel resorts that provide a convenient base for exploring the Pharaonic monuments of Giza, Saqqara and Dahshur.

Further west still, near the start of the Alex-Desert Road, is one of Cairo's swish new satellite cities: 6th October City. This is

where many of the great and the good live in order to escape the chaos of Cairo itself.

Stuff you need to know

Culture

Egypt is a quite conservative Islamic country. About 85% of the population are Muslim, while the remainder are Christian, mainly Coptic. While Egypt is nowhere near so conservative as, for example, Saudi Arabia, and the locals for the most part are used to dealing with foreigners, a few things are worth bearing in mind.

Dress sense: This is important, but doesn't need to be a headache. Women are advised to cover their shoulders and knees as a minimum (but you don't need to wear a headscarf). This is both prudent, and respectful. You are unlikely to offend anyone in touristy areas, but you will attract a whole lot more attention if you are wandering around in shorts and singlet. For men it doesn't matter so much, but it's considered more respectable to wear trousers rather than shorts.

Public behaviour: It's best for couples to avoid overt signs of affection. Holding hands is fine, but full-on pashing in the street definitely isn't! Physical contact between the sexes in Egypt is limited, though you will see men holding hands and kissing each other – that's how it's done here! Also, be mindful of the Call to Prayer. Egyptians will usually turn their music off so it doesn't compete, and this certainly isn't the time for you to "Cheers" and down a shot of vodka. Likewise, watch out for prayer mats on the street, and try to avoid stepping on them.

Hospitality: Egyptians are super-friendly, inquisitive, and (Cairenes in particular) can sometimes come off as a little blunt. You will be regaled wherever you go with cries of "Welcome in Egypt," and "What's your name?" Many people will want to practise their English with you. One of the first questions people often ask is your marital status, or your religion! You may also be lucky enough to be invited to someone's home for a meal; or even better yet, to a wedding! Go, as it will likely be the highlight of your trip. (Click here for more information on food and going out.)

Health and Safety

## Cairo Snapshot continued

For such a large city, Cairo is incredibly safe. There is very little chance of your being robbed, much less attacked. You should, of course, still take all the normal precautions you would when travelling anywhere in the world.

The combination of crowds, sun and pollution can wear down visitors to Cairo. So drink plenty of water, and make sure to slip-slap-slop! Officially, the tap water here is safe to drink because it's so heavily chlorinated, but it still takes some getting used to. Bottled water is widely available, and cheap. Unfortunately, you can't do anything about the crowds or pollution – you just have to suck it up! Also, be prepared that many people in Cairo smoke, everywhere. Very few restaurants or bars have non-smoking areas.

It's not unusual for visitors to suffer from a bout of traveller's diarrhoea, or "Ramesse's Revenge". You just have to take this in your stride and ride it out. Keeping well hydrated, and washing your hands before putting them anywhere near your mouth, will reduce your chances of being struck down. Bear in mind that some of the money is filthy. If you do need to grab any medication, there are pharmacies everywhere, and the staff are well trained and usually speak English.

The biggest annoyance for most visitors is the hassle factor. Anywhere the tourists go, the salesman and touts spring up too. They are persistent, silver-tongued, and very good at what they do. The majority of Egyptians are honest, and almost painfully generous and helpful, but a small minority in the tourist trade view all foreigners as walking \$\$ signs, so be prepared. It should go without saying that whenever you are buying anything in the bazaars, you will be expected to haggle.

Sometimes, this hassle has a darker edge to it, and foreign women here (as well as the locals) can fall prey to sexual harassment in the streets. This is normally confined to inappropriate comments and cat-calls, but the odd grope is not unheard of, especially in crowded areas. You can minimise the chances of this happening by dressing conservatively, and travelling with a man if possible. For single women, wearing a fake wedding ring is also a good idea.

Money and other practicalities

The currency here is the Egyptian Pound (LE). ATM's and exchanges are widely available, though not many shops or restaurants will let you pay with plastic. Small change can sometimes be hard to find, so hoard your 1 LE notes (you'll need them to use the toilet in many places). Baksheesh is a big part of life in Egypt. It can be thought of as tipping – for a service given, out of charity, or to smooth the way through the machinations of government bureaucracy.

Internet cafés are all over the place, cheap to use and with generally good connection speeds. Many cafes also have Wi-Fi access. Post offices are common, though the post system is not the most reliable in the world. If you want to call home, the street kiosks sell phone cards. Minatel is the best – the green and yellow phone booths.

The most important piece of advice Pack your sense of humour along with oodles of patience, throw out your preconceptions, and just dive right in! Cairo can be a challenging city to visit. Yes, it is big, smelly, dirty and crowded. Yes, some people will try to rip you off, take advantage of you, or ask you for baksheesh. Yes, even the simplest task can turn into a massive mission. But that's the game, here. Scratch beneath the surface, and you'll find there is nowhere on earth that is as exhilarating, fascinating or welcoming as Cairo.

Whether you are here for a weekend or a week, on a business trip or your honeymoon, interested in Pharaonic monuments, getting off the beaten track, or simply the food, Cairo has it all. It truly deserves its medieval appellation of Umm al-Dounia, the "Mother of the World."  
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### History

Cairo is a city in which the past and present are inextricably intertwined. Its history is long, colourful, and turbulent. Despite the presence of the Pyramids, Cairo is not technically a Pharaonic city. Rather, it is an amalgamation of separate cities that were established by successive conquerors since Persian times. But seeing as modern day Greater Cairo has expanded to include the remains of the ancient Egyptian past, this is the natural starting point for an exploration of Cairo's tangled history.

### Pre-history

The savannahs of Egypt were inhabited by hunter-gatherers more than 250,000 years ago. During the Neolithic period (from around 9,500 BC) communities began to settle in both northern and southern Egypt. By around 4000 BC, it seems Egypt was divided into two vying federations: Lower Egypt (the delta region) and Upper Egypt (the Nile valley south of where the delta begins).

The Pharaonic period: 3,100 – 525 BC (Dates given are the conventionally accepted approximate ones, but are still much disputed.)

Around 3,100 BC, a semi-mythical figure known as Menes is said to have unified Upper and Lower Egypt into a single entity. It was around this time that the city of Memphis was established, situated at the beginning of the delta – the symbolic meeting point of Upper and Lower Egypt.

Memphis was probably the first dynastic city in world. It was the capital city of Egypt during the Early Dynastic Period (3,100 to 2,686 BC) – when the Step Pyramid of Saqqara was built – and the Old Kingdom (2,686 to 2,181 BC) – when the pyramids at Dahshur and Giza were built.

Throughout the following 1,650-odd years of stability and chaos, Memphis remained a key ancient Egyptian city – swinging between capital city, and important administrative centre. Its power was not fully diminished until the Arab invasion of the 7th Century AD.

As well as the remains of Memphis, and the pyramids and tombs of the necropolis, the other main ancient Egyptian settlement within what is now Greater Cairo was the religious city of On, known to the Greeks as Heliopolis. Situated to the north-west of the modern suburb of Heliopolis, there's nothing left to see these days.

Of Persians and Greeks: 525 – 30 BC

When the Persians conquered Egypt in 525 BC, they established a new city on the east bank of the Nile, called Babylon-in-Egypt. This city grew up around a fortress built to protect a canal linking the Nile to the Red Sea, and was situated in the area now known as Old Cairo. This settlement marks the beginning of the history of Cairo proper,

## Cairo Snapshot continued

around 2,500 years after Memphis was first established by the ancient Egyptians.

When Alexander the Great conquered Egypt in 332 BC, he paid tribute to the priests of Memphis, but chose to build the capital city that bears his name up on the north coast. The Ptolemaic Dynasty, established by Alexander's General Ptolemy, ruled Egypt for around 300 years, but had little to do with Babylon-in-Egypt.

Roman and Byzantine rule: 30 BC – 642 BC

During the twilight years of Ptolemaic rule, Roman influence over Egypt grew. Cleopatra VII fought to keep Egypt independent, bearing Julius Caesar a son, and then allying herself with Mark Anthony. They were defeated by Octavian in 30 BC, and Egypt was finally swallowed up by the Roman Empire.

Rome's main interest in Egypt was as a source of food. They therefore guarded the important trade routes, and in 130 AD Emperor Trajan rebuilt the fortress of Babylon-on-the-Nile. Alexandria was effectively left alone, and remained the cultural and administrative capital of Egypt.

The Jewish and Egyptian pagan inhabitants of Babylon-on-the-Nile were resentful of Hellenistic and Roman dominance, and with the introduction of Christianity to Egypt in the 1st Century AD, many of them converted.

After Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official imperial religion in the early 4th Century, churches started being built in the area. Some of these can still be seen in Old Cairo today, such as the Hanging Church and the Church of St Sergius.

The Arab invasion and the establishment of Fustat: 642 – 969 AD

When the Muslim armies of General Amr Ibn al-Aas invaded Egypt in the 7th Century AD, the population of Babylon-in-Egypt barely resisted. (They were still being persecuted by their Byzantine overlords.) Al-Aas established a camp near the fort, and went off to conquer Alexandria.

When he returned victorious in 642 AD, he found a dove nesting in his tent. Declaring this a sign from Allah, he established on this spot the first mosque ever built in Egypt – the Mosque of Amr Ibn al-Aas. This

area of Old Cairo became the focal point for Egypt's new capital city, known as al-Fustat, "The Camp".

The next few hundred years saw a convoluted internecine struggle within the Islamic world, in which the Damascus-based Umayyad dynasty gave way to the Baghdad-based Abbasids, who built their own capital city to the north-east of Fustat.

Successive, short-lived Egyptian dynasties, such as the Tulunids (who founded the Ibn Tulun Mosque) and the Ikhshidids, also built their own capitals, which all merged together to form the sprawling metropolis of Fustat-Masr.

These successive settlements, from Persian times through to the early Islamic cities, are the area known today as Old Cairo.

The Fatimids come to town: 969 – 1171 AD

The Fatimid khalifs were Shi'a Muslims from Tunisia who conquered Egypt in 969 AD and formed an empire that stretched across much of North Africa, Syria and western Arabia. In time-honoured fashion, the Fatimids established their own capital city further north of Fustat-Masr.

They named this city al-Qahirah, "The Victorious", which is the Arabic name for Cairo today. This Fatimid city is loosely synonymous with the area tourists know today as Islamic Cairo. The walls built around it are still standing in places, as are the north and south gates.

Under the first two rulers, the city was prosperous and stable. Beautiful Islamic monuments, such as al-Azhar Mosque, were built. Later rulers, such as the insane al-Hakim, builder of al-Hakim Mosque, were less successful, and decay began slowly to set in.

Saladin and the Ayyubid dynasty: 1171 – 1250 AD

Sent to Cairo to help fight against the Crusaders, Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi became ruler of Egypt on the death of the last Fatimid khalif in 1171 AD. Known in the west as Saladin, he spent much of his rule liberating territory in the Holy Land from the Crusaders.

Salah al-Din built the Citadel on a hill between al-Qahirah and Fustat-Masr, thus bringing both under his control. He also extended the city walls, built numerous

hospitals, and established madrassas to promote Sunni rather than Shi'a Islam. He refused to take a religious title, referring to himself as al-Sultan ("The Power") instead.

His successors managed to repel the Fifth Crusade, but came to rely too heavily on warrior-slaves from Central Asia in their army. When Sultan Ayyub died with no heir, and his wife – a former slave girl – openly assumed power, the time was ripe for the warrior-slave caste of Mamluks to take over.

The Mamluk intrigues: 1250 – 1517 AD

The period of Mamluk rule was one of intense contradictions. On the one hand, they built extensively across the whole city, commissioning some of Cairo's finest mosques and Islamic monuments. Many of them can still be seen today in Islamic Cairo, such as the Sultan Hassan Mosque, al-Mu'ayyad Mosque, the Mosque-Madrassa of al-Ghuri, and the Mausoleum of Sultan Qaitbay.

They also built up public institutions, and fostered the development of learning, the arts and trade.

On the other hand, their rule was characterised by bloody intrigue and feuds, as rival factions attempted to scheme, murder and sodomise their way to power.

Ottoman rule, British occupation and the rise of nationalism: 1517 – 1952 AD

In 1517 Egypt was absorbed into the Ottoman empire. Little more than a provincial backwater, it was largely left to its own devices, and Mamluk power remained strong.

Following the French invasion of 1798, ultimately repulsed by combined British and Ottoman forces, an Albanian officer in the Ottoman army stepped in to the power vacuum. Mohammed Ali was confirmed Pasha of Egypt in 1805, and immediately began to consolidate his rule.

After destroying the remnants of the Mamluk power structure, he enlisted European help to start modernising Egypt, building infrastructure such as railways, barrages on the Nile, and factories. More than anyone else, he is considered to be the founder of modern Egypt. The Mosque of Mohammed Ali at the Citadel still dominates the Cairo skyline to this day.

## Cairo Snapshot continued

For the most part, his successors continued this period of modernisation. In 1869 the Suez Canal was opened, under Khedive Ismail. However, all this modernisation came at a price, and Egypt found itself ever deeper in debt.

In 1875, Ismail had to sell his shares in the Suez Canal to the British government, at which point most of the profits from the canal began to bleed out of the country. Despite technically still being part of the Ottoman empire, Britain exerted increasing control over Egypt, until it was effectively a colony in everything but name.

During the First World War, Egypt was officially made a British protectorate. Following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire after the war, Britain was forced by a growing nationalist movement to grant Egypt a limited form of independence, and Fouad (one of Khedive Ismail's sons) was crowned king.

In the period leading up to the Second World War, tensions ran high between the British, the King (perceived as a British stooge) and the Wafd nationalist party. After the war, anti-British riots and strikes supported by the Muslim Brotherhood led to the temporary evacuation of British troops, and democratic elections in which the Wafd party formed a government.

**Nasser and the 1952 revolution: 1952 – 1970**

In January 1952 the British garrison in Ismailia attacked the main police station, believing the police were aiding the Muslim Brotherhood in their campaign of resistance. A number of police officers were killed, and the following day huge riots broke out in protest in Cairo. King Farouk sent in the army to control them, and dissolved the government.

On July 23rd 1952 a group known as the Free Officers seized power, deposing King Farouk. The official leader of the group was General Naguib, though Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser was regarded as being the real power behind the movement. (Note that although commonly referred to as a revolution, this event was really a military coup d'état.)

On 26th July 1953 Egypt was declared a republic. In June 1956 Nasser was sworn in as president. During his presidency, Egypt finally wrested control of the Suez Canal

from the British during the 1956 Suez crisis, and began construction of the Aswan High Dam. Feudal estates were broken up and redistributed, and advances were made in both education and health care.

On the other hand, his vision of Pan-Arabism led him to get involved in the Yemen civil war, and also helped precipitate the disastrous Six Day War. In true Soviet style, his regime was brutal in preventing and crushing any form of dissent or opposition.

**Sadat switches it all around: 1970 – 1981**

When Anwar Sadat took presidency on Nasser's death in 1970, he set about reversing Nasser's policies of centralized economic control. In 1973, Egypt, Jordan and Syria launched the 6th October War, in which they managed to break into Israeli-occupied Sinai, before eventually being pushed back.

This war, commemorated in the October War Panorama, changed everything. Sadat instituted his "open door" policy of private and foreign investment, and there was no shortage of Arab investors now willing to pump money into the country. The economy grew rapidly, although this new-found wealth was not distributed at all equitably. Sadat also allowed some rival political parties, and relaxed censorship of the press.

The war also paved the way for the Camp David Agreement of 1978 in which – in order to curry favour with the West – Sadat recognised Israel's right to exist, in return for getting back the Sinai. As punishment for this perceived betrayal, Egypt was ostracised from the Arab world.

Sadat also courted organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, believing their brand of political Islam would act as a counter-balance to the Left. This backfired on him, as politicised Islam became ever more powerful. When he finally cracked down on these groups, it was too late. He was assassinated in 1981.

**The reign of Mubarak: 1981 – present day**

Mohammed Hosni Mubarak is Egypt's longest serving ruler since Mohammed Ali. He has presided over Egypt during a tremendously difficult period in its history, including two Gulf Wars and September 11th, continuing problems in the occupied Palestinian territories, increasing internal

Islamic militancy, and a handful of terrorist attacks against foreigners. He has had to tread a thin and treacherous line between cosying up to the West, maintaining Egypt's status in the eyes of the Arab world, and preventing domestic troubles.

While the economy appears robust, the gap between rich and poor is growing fast, and the majority of ordinary Egyptians are struggling to make ends meet. Foreign debt is huge, and prices for basic commodities rising. There is growing cynicism and anger with a government that uses the bogeyman of Islamic terrorism to justify repressive domestic policies – including the continuation of the Emergency Law that was put in place when Sadat was assassinated – and yet seems to pursue policies that could further radicalise the population.

There is also concern that Mubarak is grooming his son to assume power from him in 2011, in elections that will appear fair, but will be anything but.

While tourism remains strong (though subject to the vagaries of international politics and economics), and Egypt is as safe and vibrant a place to visit as it has ever been, it is clear that – as for much of the rest of the world – the coming years will be crucial in determining the course of Egypt's future.

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## Hotel Insights

As one of the oldest tourist destinations on earth, Cairo has a whole host of hotels to suit every budget and need. Whether you are a family looking for somewhere kid-friendly, a traveller on business, or a backpacker travelling on a shoe-string, there's something just right for you.

The first thing to remember with hotels in Cairo is that standards tend to be lower than in more developed countries. A three star hotel in Cairo is not comparable to, for example, a three star hotel in London. This doesn't have to be a problem, it just means you need to have a little more patience with the staff, and you should check your room carefully.

Make sure everything works, and that it is clean – especially the bathroom. In lower budget hotels, water can be a problem. There may be no hot water, little water

## Cairo Snapshot continued

pressure, or the toilet may not flush. No worries, just ask for another room. And while we're on the subject of the toilet, don't throw toilet paper into it – the sewage system can't handle it!

You don't normally have to worry about mosquitoes in Cairo, but what you do have to worry about is the noise! In general, rooms towards the top of the hotel – away from the street – will be quieter. The problem with this is that some of the elevators in Cairo hotels are as old as the Pyramids, and can take an age to arrive. Note that even if your room is quiet as the grave, there's a good chance you'll be woken up by the Call to Prayer each morning anyway. Hey – it's Egypt, and this is part of the fun!

It's also important to check carefully exactly what is included in the price. Breakfast could be extra, and taxes are sometimes added on top rather than included in the quoted price. Also, be wary of using the phone in your room – that's an easy way to rack up an extortionate bill!

Although most hotels will have some sort of restaurant, and the bigger hotels will have numerous facilities, some hotels are dry, and serve no alcohol at all.

In terms of payment, be aware that not all hotels will accept plastic. As with most parts of the world, rack rates are much more expensive than booking the hotel in advance. You may find that you can negotiate a discount on your room, especially in cheaper places, or during quiet times, but certainly don't bank on it.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, be wary of the tours offered by hotels in Cairo. Whether the swankiest resort or the dirtiest flop-house, they will offer tours around the main sites of Cairo. Sometimes these are very aggressively pushed on to tourists. They will always be much more expensive than arranging something yourself, and you may find you spend more time at papyrus factories and perfume stores than you do at the sites themselves.

If you don't like dealing with taxi drivers, you can ask your hotel to arrange a driver or taxi for you. It will still be more than flagging a cab down on the street should cost, but – in theory at least – it's less hassle!

Where to stay

It all depends on what you are looking for!

The luxury resorts out near the Pyramids in Giza are top notch, and great for pampering yourself. They also tend to be the best option for families, and come equipped with swimming pools, gyms and other recreational facilities. However, their proximity to the Pharaonic sites means they are not that convenient for the rest of Cairo. If you are staying in Cairo for a while, you will spend a lot of time and money shuttling back and forth. Some of the best hotels in Cairo are out here, such as the world-famous Mena House Oberoi, Le Meridien Pyramids, and the Cataract Pyramids Resort.

If you are conscious of your budget, then Downtown is undoubtedly the place to be. Most of Cairo's cheap hotels and hostels are located either on or near Midan Tahrir. They all tend to be pretty similar, and rather hit and miss, but good options include Pension Roma, Lialy Hostel, and Wake up! All of these hotels are minutes away from the captivating Egyptian Museum.

If you want the convenience of Downtown, have a bit more money to spend, and fancy a trip down memory lane, then the Windsor Hotel is a good bet. While its dark wood mashrabia panelling has seen better days, it still oozes charm, and has one of the best rooftop bars in Cairo. Alternatively, head to Talisman Hotel at the top of Talaat Harb street for one of Cairo's most enchanting boutique hotel experiences.

That's not to say that Downtown Cairo has no luxury options – it does! The Ramses Hilton provides the level of comfort and service that one would expect of the Hilton chain, and is popular with business travellers and visiting "Gulfies". The swish Nile Hotel is slightly more central, whilst the Conrad International is a bit north of Downtown, along the Cornice, and is another popular option with business travellers.

The hotels of Garden City are ideal for the visitor who wants a great location, but doesn't want to be smack bang in the bedlam of Downtown. Hotels such as the Four Seasons Nile Plaza, and the Semiramis Intercontinental, are amongst the best in Cairo, but there's also the more affordable, though no less charming, option of the Garden City House Hostel.

If it's super luxury you are after, the Grand Hyatt Hotel – at the north tip of Manyal Island – has it in spades. And if you want to rub shoulders with expats and embassies, and have access to some of the most westernised nightlife in Cairo, then the Zamalek hotels are a good bet. The Cairo Marriott and the Sofitel El-Gezira deserve their reputations for opulence and service, whereas hotels such as the Flamenco are for those who want a touch of class without breaking the bank.

Business travellers might prefer to stay nearer to the airport and conference facilities of Heliopolis. Some of the biggies here include the Movenpick Heliopolis, Le Meridien Heliopolis, and the Sonesta Hotel.

Wherever you choose to stay, and no matter how comfortable it is, make sure you don't forget to head out and explore the best sights Cairo has to offer!

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## Restaurants Insights

Drinking and dining options in Cairo are as varied as the city itself. You can grab a cheap, tasty and filling street snack on the fly, sit down to a gourmet four course meal at a posh restaurant, and everything in between. As well as local cuisine, a wide range of international food is available all over the city, including the main Western fast food outlets.

Egyptian food

Egyptian food tends to be simple, hearty and filling, heavy on the oil and spices (though rarely spicy, as in fiery). Bread is a massive part of the Egyptian diet, and the country has one of the highest (if not the highest) per capita consumption in the world. In fact, the Egyptian word for bread is the same as for life – 'eesh. It mainly falls into two categories: thick, whole grain "baladi" bread; and thinner, whitemash bread, a bit like pita bread.

Two traditional dishes, often eaten for breakfast, include fuul and taamiya. Fuul is a sort of stew made of fava beans, either mashed up or served whole, and ranges from the rather bland to the deliciously spiced. Taamiya is the Egyptian version of falafel – mashed up and deep fried bean (usually chickpea) patties.

## Cairo Snapshot continued

Both fuul and taamiya sandwiches are available at hole-in-the-wall restaurants on almost every street in Cairo, and cost next to nothing. It's best to buy these from a busy restaurant, as early in the day as possible (they're disgusting if they've been lying around for a while), and if you have a sensitive stomach, it might be sensible to exercise some caution. One of the most famous, and cleanest, places to get fuul and taamiya is at Felfela – an Egyptian fast food chain that has branches all over the place, including Downtown Cairo and by the Pyramids. (Be warned – the one at the Pyramids is very touristy.)

The closest thing Egypt has to a national dish is *koshary*. This is a carbohydrate bomb, usually made out of different types of pasta, lentils, chickpeas, fried onions and tomato salsa. You can also add a potent chilli sauce (careful, it's as evil as it looks!), and a pungent mix of lime juice and garlic known as *da'a*. *Koshary* tastes a lot better than it sounds, is extremely filling, and very cheap – a large dish will rarely be more than around 5 LE.

Like fuul and taamiya, *koshary* is available at street restaurants all over Cairo. Downtown in particular has some of the best *koshary* joints. Probably the most famous in Cairo, if not the world, is Abu Tarek. The Al-Omda chain also does a decent bowl, and you can add chicken or meat to it.

Another common form of street food is *shawarma* – a chicken or meat (meat in Egypt effectively means beef) sandwich, where the flesh is cut from a sizzling, revolving spit, a bit like a *donner kebab*. Slightly less common and a little more expensive than other street foods, you still won't have to go far before you bump into a *shawarma* joint. *Gad* is probably the most famous of the chains that serve them.

Finally, standard *kebab* and *kofta* are also pretty common, usually sold by the kilo. The best ones are grilled over charcoal. You'll also notice lots of tiny restaurants serving spit-roasted chickens. A whole chicken, with bread, salad and rice, will usually cost around 25 LE.

Most decent Egyptian/Oriental restaurants will offer some variation of the above foods, though at a higher cost. *Mezzes*, especially *tahina* (sesame seed paste) and *baba ghanoush* (aubergine) are

also common; *hummus* less so. Restaurants such as *Abou Shakra* (just next to Garden City), *Cedars* (in Mohandiseen), *Andrea* (in Giza), *Al-Omda* (all over the place) and *Alfi Bey* (Downtown) are good mid-range Oriental style restaurants.

Other typical Egyptian foods include *fattah* – a mix of rice, bread and meat, served with a tomato sauce (a bit like an Egyptian *Biryani*) – and *feteer*. *Feteers* are also known as Egyptian pancakes, pies or pizzas, though they most resemble a heavy, stuffed crepe. You can have them sweet or savoury. Cheap, cheerful and ubiquitous, there are a number of joints Downtown that serve them, and of course the ever-famous Egyptian Pancake House in Khan al-Khalili.

Desserts are usually super-sweet. *Mihallabiya* is a kind of sweet cross between rice pudding and *blancmange*, sometimes seasoned with nuts and raisins. *Umm Ali* is a very typical Egyptian pudding, like mushy, milky bread pudding mixed with nuts and raisins.

Finally, special mention must go to *molokhiya*. *Molokhiya*, also known as Jew's Mallow, is as Egyptian as the Pyramids. It's a slimy green vegetable that is not dissimilar to spinach, and is usually served as a gloopy soup, along with rice and a meat such as rabbit. It has a most disturbing texture, and is a rather acquired taste, but is as traditional as it comes. A good place to try *Molokhiya* is at *Abou el Sid* restaurant in *Zamalek*. This is one of the best, and most famous, traditional Egyptian restaurants in Cairo.

Note that Cairo is not the best city in the world for vegetarians. With all the fuul, taamiya and *koshary* knocking around, you're not going to starve, but your options will be limited in most places. *L'Aubergine* in *Zamalek* used to be an exclusively vegetarian restaurant, though it now serves meat dishes too. It does, however, still have an OK choice of veggie stuff. *Mezza Luna*, also in *Zamalek*, is also a good choice for some mouth-watering meatless pasta dishes.

### Drinks

Sweet, black tea is the most common drink. Sweet here means at least two, and possibly as many as four sugars! Most restaurants are used to foreigners' strange ways, and will bring the sugar separately. They might even offer you milk, though mint

would be a more normal accompaniment here!

Hot on the heels of tea, is thick, grainy Turkish coffee. Also usually served sweet, this tiny shot would kick the living caffeine out of a double espresso if it came down to a celebrity coffee death match. Just make sure not to swallow the grains – they are left in the bottom of the glass.

Nescafe is commonly available, and considered a delicacy, and the normal range of espressos and lattes will be found in any posh joint.

Fresh juices are served everywhere, both in restaurants and at street stalls. Lemon, sugarcane and mango tend to be available year round. Others, such as pomegranate and watermelon, are seasonal.

Egyptians also drink some other, slightly more unusual drinks. *Karkade* is an infusion made out of hibiscus leaves. Served hot or cold, it's like Egyptian *Ribena*, and is said to be very good for the heart and blood pressure. Infusions of aniseed and fennel are also quite common, and *sahlab* is a thick, custardy drink that is perfect for cold winter days.

And yes – alcohol is widely available, both in restaurants and bars, and from some bottle shops. See the nightlife section for more details!

### Western food

You'll find loads of decent foreign cuisine all over Cairo, especially in areas such as *Zamalek*, *Mohandiseen* and *Maadi*, and in the posh hotels. Italian is particularly popular, though there is also a fair amount of French, Chinese, Indian, and even some excellent Thai. Bizarrely, Cairo is pretty good for affordable sushi, and there is an excellent Swiss restaurant called *Little Swiss* down in *Maadi*, if you fancy a touch of fondue. If you are craving a steak, head to *Steak Out* in *Dokki*, or *Le Steak* in *Zamalek*. *Fuddrucker's* and *Lucille's* do particularly good burgers.

Fast food such as *McDonald's*, *KFC*, *Hardee's* and *Pizza Hut* is everywhere, especially around Downtown, *Dokki*, *Mohandiseen* and *Heliopolis*. There is even a *Pizza Hut* opposite the Pyramids!

Eating out and staying in

## Cairo Snapshot continued

Egyptians tend to go out to eat very late. It's not unusual to see families – with children – settling down to eat their evening meal at 10.30, or even later!

If you are lucky enough to be invited to an Egyptian's house for lunch or dinner – go! All of the local foods described above are much tastier when they made in the family kitchen according to the old family recipe, and it's a great chance to get to know more about Egyptian culture.

Do try a little of the wide range of dishes you will no doubt be presented with. Don't, however, stuff yourself, because the food will keep coming, and coming, and coming...! You don't need to finish everything put in front of you. In fact, if you do, more will be brought out, since it is the host's responsibility to ensure their guest is satisfied, and Egyptian's take hospitality very seriously.

Depending on where you are, you may be eating with your hands. This is quite normal. Since Egyptians use their left hand in the toilet, you'll find some will avoid using it when eating (except, perhaps, to help with tearing bread). Don't worry too much if you find this difficult, because the majority of people ignore this custom anyway.

Finally, it's polite to take along some sort of gift for the family if you are invited to their home for dinner. A package of Arabic sweets from the local bakery, or a bunch of flowers, should do the trick. Enjoy!

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### Nightlife Insights

Cairo is a genuine 24 hour city, and while it may not seem like it to the casual visitor, the city has a varied and vibrant nightlife. While it is not so alcohol driven as in many Western cities, there are plenty of bars and clubs, and a large range of live music. There is also a thriving arts scene and plenty of cinemas.

Most Egyptians tend to go out late, and many venues don't get going until after 10 pm. Strict licensing laws, both for liquor and for music, mean that few places stay open past about 3 am, although a number of cafes are open 24 hours.

The majority of Cairo's nightlife is concentrated around Downtown, Zamalek, and to a lesser extent, Maadi.

#### Bars

It's often difficult in Cairo to determine what is a bar, and what is a restaurant: many restaurants serve alcohol, and many bars serve food. Bars in Cairo range from the spit and sawdust Downtown dives, to hip Zamalek bistros, to posh hotel lounges. There are also a handful of rooftop bars, perfect for whiling away those sticky summer evenings.

Notable Downtown bars include:

Horeya – a lively, no frills coffee shop that also serves a local Egyptian beer, Stella (brewed in Egypt, but now owned by Heineken). The clientele includes all sorts of locals, expats and tourists.

Stella Bar – cramped, dingy and dirt-cheap. The Odeon Palace – rooftop bar on top of the Odeon Palace Hotel; serves food and sometimes shisha.

The Carlton rooftop – on top of the Carlton Hotel, this cheap and cheerful bar often has blaring Oriental music.

The Greek Club – another cheap option, with an art deco interior and a charming courtyard that's great in the summer. Also serves some food.

El Mojito Skylounge – funky bar on top of the Nile Hotel, great for cocktail sun-downers.

Good Zamalek options:

La Bodega – a swanky restaurant, lounge and bar.

L'Aubergine – part restaurant, part bar, very popular with the younger cool kids, and absolutely rammed when there's football on.

Deals – cosy and welcoming expat haunt that also does good food.

Pour Vous – simple rooftop with stunning views; also serves shisha, and food is available, but don't expect much of the service.

Pub 28 – crowded and with decent food, though not always that welcoming.

Harry's Pub – extortionate British style pub in the Cairo Marriott Hotel.

Sequoia – more of a restaurant than a bar, but a great place to sip beers and smoke shisha while watching the Nile drift past.

Maadi:

The Red Onion – good restaurant-cum-bar, popular with expats.

Boss Bar – a great spot for karaoke; sometimes has live music.

Pub 55 – trendy bar with good food and even better service.

Honourable mentions:

Bull's Eye Pub in Mohandiseen is a British style pub with a dartboard. Serves food, and hosts karaoke and live music.

Nomad Bar is a rooftop bar on the King Hotel in Dokki. It's nicely decked out, and serves beer and shisha. The food is mediocre, though, and it's sometimes overrun with tour groups.

Hard Rock Café – come on, you knew there must be one! It's in the Grand Hyatt Hotel, so you can munch on chicken wings and down beers whilst watching the Nile float by.

Clubs and live music

There aren't that many decent clubs in Cairo, but a handful of swish club/bar/lounge type places are starting to spring up. Stiletto (opposite the Cairo Sheraton), Tamarai (in the Nile City Towers next to the Conrad Hotel) and Purple (Zamalek) are all super-posh, super-expensive and great for posing, if that's what floats your boat! As well as DJ's, they will sometimes have live acts.

Many of the big hotels also have clubs, as well as casinos. Latex, in the Nile Hotel, is considered to be one of the best, though it can be a bit of a meat market. Note that all these venues have entrance fees and address codes, and will be reluctant to let in groups of single men.

By far and away one of the best and most down-to-earth nightspots in Cairo is the Cairo Jazz Club. There is live music (or sometimes a DJ) every night of the week, and despite the name, they play all sorts of music, from Latin to Funk to Rock. For the most part it's quite a young crowd. Best of all, entry is free!

After Eight in Downtown is another bar that often has live music. It does OK food, but gets extremely smoky and crowded. Also, the Swiss Club in Imbaba puts on a popular dance party every Thursday evening – a mixture of RnB, Reggae and other African beats.

## Cairo Snapshot continued

The other place that hosts tons of live music is al-Sawy Cultural Centre in Zamalek. This is the place to go to listen to classical and contemporary Arabic music, though they also host a whole range of other genres, and occasionally even international acts. Unusually for Cairo, the whole centre is no smoking, and no alcohol is allowed.

Another good option for traditional live music is Makan, near Saad Zaghloul Metro Station, just south of Downtown. Makan specialises in performances of endangered religion-and-folk-inspired music from Africa.

Finally, the most charming venue for live music in Cairo is al-Genaina Theatre in al-Azhar Park. This is a modern outdoor theatre built to resemble a Roman-style theatre. They have a diverse range of performances by innovative local and international artists, many of which blend modern and traditional sounds. Concerts are either free or very cheap, and you must also pay the small fee to enter the park itself.

### Cafes

Many Egyptians' idea of a night out is to head to the local café to hook up with friends, smoke shisha, and perhaps play some games. The café, or *ahwa*, has been the lynchpin of Egyptian social life for centuries. There are simple local cafes all over the place. They all serve tea, coffee and some juices, as well as shisha pipes.

Shisha pipes are the Egyptian water pipes, known elsewhere as hookah pipes, *nargilahs*, or *hubbly bubbly's*. You smoke a special type of very moist tobacco mixed with molasses, which can be either flavoured or unflavoured. Flavours tend to be fruit. Apple is the best, though cantaloupe, peach and cherry are also good. Unflavoured tobacco, or *maasel*, will blow your head off if you aren't used to it.

Whilst there are raging debates about the relative health effects of shisha versus cigarettes, the two experiences are entirely dissimilar. Smoking a shisha is pleasantly mellowing, with sweet-smelling smoke and a lulling bubbling sound as the smoke passes through the water. It's well worth trying a puff, though it's important to realise that you are smoking, so by definition it's not good for you!

Posher, more westernised cafes will usually serve food as well as a wider range of

drinks. Both types of café will often have traditional games such as backgammon or dominoes. Cards is less common. The more westernised cafes will sometimes even have games such as Monopoly or Risk!

This might sound pretty tame compared to your average night out in London, but don't knock it till you've tried it! The cafes are often lively, even raucous places, full of happy chatter and laughter. You won't wake up with a hangover the next day, and you will certainly remember the whole of the evening!

There are local style coffee shops literally everywhere. The most famous of all is al-Fishawi, in Khan al-Khalili. The more modern, expensive ones tend to be concentrated around Mohandiseen, Zamalek, Dokki and Heliopolis. *Momento*, in Dokki, is particularly lively, and has loads of games.

Film, theatre, dance and other culture

There are plenty of cinemas in Cairo showing both Arabic and foreign films. The best cinemas for foreign films are the ones in City Stars, the Galaxy Cinema on Manyal Island, Renaissance Cinema in Maspero (just north of Downtown), and Family Land in Maadi. These are also the cinemas that are most likely to subtitle Arabic films in English. Note that film showings in Cairo run late, the last one usually starting at – or even after – midnight!

Cultural centres such as the Italian Cultural Centre and the French Cultural Centre will often show independent films, and Cairo plays host to the Cairo International Film Festival towards the end of each year.

The Cairo Opera House is the centre of the arts in Cairo. As well as regular music concerts of all sorts, it also has various sorts of theatre, opera and dance performances, and it's well worth dropping in to find out what they have going on.

Every Wednesday and Saturday at Wikalet al-Ghuri is a free Sufi dancing performance. Although undoubtedly a show, this is one of the most authentic performances you are likely to see here, and is a fascinating blend of riotous colours and hypnotic melodies. The performance begins at 8.30 pm, but arrive early to ensure you get a seat.

A number of hotels, bars and boats have belly dancing performances. Many of these are either incredibly tacky, or exceedingly seedy. The best ones tend to be at the posh hotels, and cost an arm and a leg to watch. If you can stand the cheese factor, boats such as Scarabee run daily dinner cruises where an exorbitant entrance fee buys you an open buffet, along with a variety of dancers – usually a Sufi dancer, belly dancer and some other traditional folkloric dancing.

Alternatively, the Shahrazad nightclub has regular belly dancing performances. Whilst still on the sleazy side, it's certainly not touristy, and women are present in the crowd. The venue is excellent – one of Cairo's old cabaret clubs that has been refurbished, and harks back to the golden days of the swinging Cairo nightlife scene.

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## Things to Do Insights

Egypt is arguably the oldest tourist destination on earth, and Cairo so rammed full of amazing sights that it's difficult to know where to begin. Actually, that's not true! But where do you go after you've seen the Pyramids? Well, no matter your interests or your budget, there's plenty of choice.

It's easiest to break the sights down by historical period, but first, a few words of advice. As far as possible, you want to try to avoid the worst of the sun and the crowds. The best time to visit most of the sights is when they first open in the morning. That way you should get there before the hoards of tour buses descend, and the sun isn't so fierce.

If this isn't possible, then late afternoon is an alternative, although you'll still run into the crowds. If possible, save indoor sights such as the museums for the hottest part of the day. The exception here is the Egyptian Museum: it's likely to be crowded whenever you go, but the longer you leave it, the worse it usually gets. Also, the bazaars are best visited late afternoon into the evening, since this is when they tend to be at their liveliest.

Generally speaking, the best way to get around Cairo is by taxi. If you are planning on doing a lot of sightseeing, then consider hiring a driver for the day. Your hotel will be

## Cairo Snapshot continued

able to help you with this – for a price – or you can take your chances on the street.

Guides, both official and unofficial, will be hanging around all the main sights, though you can't be sure how good they are in advance, and haggling over the fee can be a chore. If you are dead set that you want a guide, it's probably best to ask your hotel to recommend one.

### Pharaonic sights

Seeing the Pyramids of Giza is, for many, a childhood dream come true. Don't let the rubbish or the touts throw you off, these 4,500 year-old monuments really are as imposing, majestic and mysterious as people say. To properly appreciate the sheer scale of their presence, take a good walk around the site. Better yet, approach from the Sphinx end if you can. (You'll have to nip around the enclosure.)

If you get there early enough, you might be able to enter the Great Pyramid, and decide for yourself what the controversial Grand Gallery really is. If the tickets have already gone, don't despair. Going inside the Pyramid of Chephren is an experience in itself, though not for the claustrophobic! The Pyramid of Mycerinus, whilst significantly smaller than the other two, is still huge. Faced full on, it has an almost menacing quality.

Don't forget to enter the Solar Boat Museum, before heading down to see the Sphinx. This human-headed lion, cut from living rock, is still the subject of much controversy. Conventionally believed to have been built by Chephren in the 4th Dynasty, there is also evidence that suggests it is much older than that.

The other main Pharaonic site in Cairo is Saqqara, home to the Step Pyramid. Whilst not as viscerally impressive as the Giza Pyramids, in some ways this one is more significant: it was probably the first large stone structure in the world, prototype of the pyramids to follow. Saqqara also has lots of tombs that are worth visiting, so make sure you allow plenty of time to wander around. One of the best is the Mastaba of Ti. Also, don't miss the museum at the visitors centre!

Memphis, the ancient Egyptian capital, is near to Saqqara, and easy to visit at the same time. Sadly, hardly anything remains to hint at the lost splendours, but it's still worth it for ardent Pharaoh-philes!

Dahshur is the site of the first true (smooth-sided) pyramids ever built. Nowhere near so awe-inspiring as the Pyramids of Giza, they are still impressive. The site receives far fewer visitors than Giza, so the whole experience is a bit more chilled. It's also possible to go inside the Red Pyramid.

Finally – the Egyptian Museum! A treasure trove of ancient wonders, but badly set out and barely labelled. This is definitely a site where visitors benefit from guides. However you choose to visit, make sure you see the stern Old Kingdom statues on the first floor, including the diorite statue of Chephren, as well as the bizarre Amarna art of the heretic pharaoh Akhenaten.

There's also the small matter of the treasures of Tutankhamen on the first floor, including the iconic golden death mask! And if you don't fancy paying extra to see the royal mummies, then take a wander through the animal mummies section – the mummified monkey is particularly disturbing!

### Coptic sights

Coptic Cairo is one of the quaintest and most serene spots in Cairo. The Coptic Museum (opposite Mar Girgis Metro station) is modern and well laid out, a fascinating tour through the evolution of Christianity in Egypt. As well as the museum, there are numerous religious sights in the area, including the famed Hanging Church with its suspended nave, the round Cathedral of St George, and the Church of St Sergius, believed to be on the site at which the Holy Family took shelter. But it's not just about Christianity – both the oldest mosque and the oldest synagogue in Cairo are also here.

### Islamic sights

From a visitor's point of view, the endearing bedlam of Khan al-Khalili is the epicentre of Islamic Cairo, and a good base from which to explore the sights. You can head north towards Bab al-Futuh and see the wonderfully restored mosques of Muizz li-Din Allah, including the Moonlit Mosque and al-Hakim Mosque, as well as the exquisite Beit al-Souhaymi.

South leads past al-Azhar mosque and the Mosque-Madrassa of al-Ghuri towards Bab Zwayla and al-Mu'ayyad Mosque. From here you can continue south towards the Street of the Tentmakers, or head east down Darb al-Ahmar. This takes

you past al-Maridani Mosque and the Blue Mosque towards the Citadel.

The Citadel is a three-for-one deal on mosques, showcasing a simple Mamluk mosque, a charming Ottoman mosque (the first ever built in Cairo) and of course the iconic Mosque of Mohammed Ali. As well as a few museums, the Citadel offers some of the best views out over the city.

Close by are Sultan Hassan Mosque and al-Refa'i Mosque – appearing similar from the outside, they are as different as chalk and cheese inside. Ibn Tulun Mosque, with its crazy Babylonian minaret, is a short walk away.

### Markets, Museums and Galleries

As well as the Khan and the Street of the Tentmakers, Cairo is full of colourful markets that are well worth nosing around. Three of the most accessible for visitors are al-Muski, west of Khan al-Khalili; Ataba, a whole series of interlinked markets at the end of al-Muski; and al-Ezbekiya used book market, also in Ataba. Others worth mentioning are the Friday Market, and the Camel Market north of Cairo.

Museums abound in Cairo, from the dignified Islamic Art Museum, to the eclectic Gayer Anderson Museum, to the quirky Agricultural Museum and the bizarre Manyal Palace Hunting Museum. If contemporary art is more your thing, the Museum of Modern Islamic Art is in the grounds of the Cairo Opera House, and the Mahmoud Mukhtar Sculpture Museum is just a stone's throw away. If you do wander into this area, take the chance to climb the Cairo Tower, for some of the most spectacular views of Cairo.

There are also numerous contemporary art galleries. Two of the most famous and well respected are Downtown – the Townhouse Gallery and Mashrabiya Gallery. Darb 1718 is another very progressive gallery and arts centre in Old Cairo.

### The great outdoors

Being the largest city in Africa and the Middle East, Cairo isn't known for its outdoor activities! However, you don't get a "greater" outdoors than the vast expanse of the desert. Taking a camel or horse ride into the desert is an experience that will stay with you forever, especially if you ride into the desert near the Pyramids at sunset time.

## Cairo Snapshot continued

Alternatively, hop on a felucca and chillax a while on the longest river in the world. The ride down in Maadi is particularly good, since you are away from the pollution of the town centre, and there aren't any bridges to get in the way. If you can't escape the centre of Cairo, but still want a bit of peace and quiet, head over to Al-Azhar Park, Cairo's biggest and best green space.

Finally, if you are at all interested in unsustainable technologies, environmental issues or urban planning, make sure to go on the Solar Cities Urban Eco Tour. You will see how some of the poorest communities, in one of the most crowded and polluted cities on earth, are using green technology to improve their lives.

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### Travel Tips

#### Getting There By Air

Cairo International Airport (+202 2265 5000 / +202 2265 2222 / <http://www.cairo-airport.com>) is the busiest in the Middle East, and plans and development of new terminals are assuring its capability of handling air traffic from all over the world. Major carriers include:

Air Canada (+1 888 247 2262 / <http://www.aircanada.com>)

Air France (+1 800 237 2747 / <http://www.airfrance.com>)

British Airways (+1 800 247 9297 / <http://www.british-airways.com>)

Iberia (+902 400 500 / <http://www.iberia.com>)

Japanese Airlines (+1 800 525 3663 / <http://www.ar.jal.com/en/>)

Swiss (+1 877 359 7947 / <http://www.swiss.com/web/EN/Pages/index.aspx>)

United Airlines (+1 800 241 6522 / <http://www.ual.com>)

There are currently two international terminals in the airport, and a third for internal flights. A shuttle bus goes around the airport linking the terminals, but is not always reliable. There are plans to build a new "Automated People Mover." There are plenty of taxis that can ferry you around.

To get into town, you can pre-book a place on the air-conditioned Cairo Airport Shuttle Bus, or pick up a rickety local bus from

Terminal 1. There are plans to extend the Metro line all the way to the airport.

For most people, the easiest way to get to Cairo from the airport is to take a cab. You can pick up a fixed price service from inside the terminals, or take your chances with the cabs hanging around outside. A fair price to get to the centre of town is around 40-60 LE, depending on time of day and where exactly you want to go.

Car rental companies are located right outside the airport and include:

Avis (+1 800 831 2847 / <http://www.avis.com>)

Budget (+1 800 527 0700 / <http://www.budget.com>)

Europcar (+33 0825 825 490 / <http://www.europcar.com>)

Hertz (+1 800 654 3131 / <http://www.hertz.com>)

Thrifty (<http://www.thrifty.com> online reservations only)

Short-term car parking is available for about 1,000 cars and is located within walking distance of the terminal buildings.

#### Getting There Overland

It's possible to cross into Egypt overland from Israel via Taba, and there are some buses that run directly between Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Cairo - see <http://www.mazada.co.il>

You can also come from Jordan on the Aqaba-Nuweiba ferry, though it's a time-consuming and chaotic procedure.

Once in Egypt, there is an extensive local bus network that links to Cairo, though be prepared for long, rather uncomfortable rides.

#### Transport Around Cairo

Driving around Cairo is a nightmare, and it's not recommended you hire a car unless you are used to driving on such crowded, chaotic and unpredictable streets.

The easiest way to get around is by cab. They are all over the place at all times, and it's perfectly safe to flag one down anywhere, at any time of day or night. The black cabs don't have a meter, so it's best to agree a fare with the driver before you even get in. Many of them are rapacious vultures, so if you don't get a fair quote, just wait two seconds for the next cab to come along.

Some of the cars seem to be older than the Pyramids, held together only by bits of wire and the will of God. Others are brand spanking new white cabs, which are air-conditioned, and even have functioning meters! There are also a few yellow cabs, designed specifically for tourists. They also have air-conditioning and meters, and can be booked in advance on 02 2792 1761.

Either way, be prepared for the ride of your life: the only thing crazier than Cairo traffic, is Cairo driving!

Note that your hotel will always be able to sort you out with a cab, but it will usually cost you a lot more than if you flag a car down on the street.

Cairo also has a modern, efficient and very cheap Metro system of underground trains. They are well signposted in English, and run regularly, but unfortunately don't cover that much of the city yet. (There are plans...!) Some useful stops include Sadat, for Downtown and the Egyptian Museum; Ataba, which is a short walk from Islamic Cairo; Giza, to get you that little bit closer to the Pyramids; and Mar Girgis, for Old Cairo.

There are also public buses and service taxis running various routes throughout Cairo, for if you are feeling adventurous. The routes are numbered, so you need to know which number you need, although the service taxis will call out their destination as they drive along.

There are also a few ferries that cross the Nile at certain points of the river, such as from the north tip of Zamalek to Imbaba.

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### Fun Facts

#### Top 12 Cairo Facts

1. Interesting fact: Covering around 500 sq km, with an estimated population of 22 million, Greater Cairo is the largest city in Africa and the Middle East.
2. Fun fact: The Arabic name for Cairo is al-Qahirah, which means "the conqueror," "the vanquisher" or "the victorious." Most

## Cairo Snapshot continued

Egyptians call Cairo "Masr", the Arabic for Egypt. Cairo is also called the City of 1000 Minarets, and Umm al-Dounia, the "Mother of the World."

3. Useful fact: The currency is the Egyptian Pound (LE, or EGP), and electricity runs at 220 volts, 50 Hz, with standard two-pin plugs.

4. Weird fact: The Holy Family are said to have sheltered at the site of Abu Serga Church after they fled to Egypt.

5. Random fact: There are believed to be over 4.5 million cars in Cairo.

6. Fun fact: Cairo is home to the only remaining ancient wonder of the world. Yep,

one of those big stone Toblerone-shaped things.

7. Useful fact: The time zone in Cairo is GMT+2; the country dialling code is +20, and the area code is 02 (drop the 0 if calling from abroad).

8. Interesting fact: Cairo was founded in 969 by the Fatimid Caliphate from Tunisia, though there were earlier Islamic, Byzantine, Roman, Persian and Pharaonic settlements, including the legendary Memphis.

9. Weird fact: If you live in Cairo you probably support either al-Ahly or Zamalek

football club. Their rivalry is intense, yet they share the same stadium!

10. Interesting fact: Cairo hosts one of the oldest universities in the world, al-Azhar University, founded in 975 CE. And Naguib Mahfouz, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, was born in Cairo in 1882.

11. Random fact: Sunday is the first day of week; the weekend is Friday and Saturday.

12. Fun fact: The Nile runs through Cairo, and there are two large islands in the middle of the city.

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## Weather

Statistics	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature C												
Average High	19	20	23	28	32	34	35	34	33	30	25	20
Average Mean	14	15	17	21	25	27	29	28	27	24	20	15
Average Low	10	10	12	15	18	21	23	23	21	19	15	11
Temperature F												
Average High	66	68	73	82	89	94	94	94	91	85	76	68
Average Mean	57	59	63	71	77	82	83	83	81	75	67	60
Average Low	49	50	54	60	65	70	73	73	71	66	58	52
Rainy Days	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0
Rain Fall (cm)	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.4
Rain Fall (in)	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.2

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