

Walk like an Egyptian

CAIRO'S ATTRACTIONS ARE AMONG THE MOST FAMOUS IN THE WORLD. BUT AN AFTERNOON STROLL THROUGH THE BACK STREETS OF THE EGYPTIAN CAPITAL CAN BE EVERY BIT AS REWARDING

WORDS | RAF JAH



Cairo is a city of 18 million people, something that's readily apparent as you come in to land. Planes often circle south over the city, past the pyramid of Sakkara, up the Nile and over Zamalek, past the towering luxury hotels, the citadel and the Mohammad Ali Mosque before landing at the new airport. The city is famous for many things: the pyramids, the Nile, its early status as a centre of Islamic civilisation and, not least, its frantic activity. Visitors, while impressed, might be forgiven for being a little overwhelmed by the sights, sounds and smells of Egypt's rambunctious capital.

But Cairo can also be an urbane centre of culture and, in places, tranquillity. The city of the dead, the parks of Zamalek and a felucca ride down the Nile have all been well-documented, but one of the more revealing ways to pass an afternoon in the "mother of all cities" is to hop into one of the ubiquitous black-and-white cabs and go exploring.

The Mohammad Ali Mosque, with its elegantly painted ceiling, is the start of my afternoon. My Egyptian friends often ask what possesses me to wander aimlessly around in the heat, but I head down the hill

into the medresses of the old city. As I keep walking, I quickly lose track of where I am, save that I'm heading west, towards the Nile. In earlier walks, I had never made it that far, as Cairo always throws up something that grabs my attention.

It's early summer and the heat of the day is intense as I pass by the first in an unending stream of donkey drawn carts. My Nikon in hand, I snap one of them for the file. There's no ill feeling towards photographers here and I walk past shops, happily snapping away. Occasionally I show an image to a Cairean, more often than not eliciting a cackle of laughter. Unsure if this joviality stems from my efforts, or if they genuinely enjoy the photos, I feel the need to keep walking – time is precious, and I only have one more afternoon to spend in Cairo. One more six hour period of total freedom, to scuff my feet and rub shoulders with the heart of this most energetic of Arab cities. I meander in between the French-style houses and the numerous, tiny mosques. I slalom here and there, and respectfully step off the pavement and stare at the sky when a lady or family comes the other way.

Eventually I can go no further without tea. My head spins and my pace slows, so I find a street shop and greet the entirely male clientele. While most seem preoccupied with watching a football match on television, they still nod back and someone pulls up a chair. I position my seat under a tree to make the most of the shade and ask the *mabdou* (helper) for *shay* (tea). Being a foreigner, I am served tea with separate sugar, but I shove the entire lot into my glass and stir. My next glass comes like my neighbours' – with an inch of sugar lining the bottom. People are puffing away on shisha pipes, but for me the tea is quite enough. I sit with my back to a nearby Lada taxi and watch Cairo go by, taking a moment to fully appreciate this side of the city that I love. The sun sinks lower in the sky and the city shuffles, wanders or strides past me.

My reverie is broken by my mobile phone. It is an Egyptian friend, wondering where I have got to. Almost of its own accord, my afternoon stroll has ultimately taken over my entire day. The tranquillity shattered, I once again hail a trusty black-and-white cab and re-enter frenetic Cairo. ☘