


GLOBAL FLAVOURS.



George Epaminondas travels to one of the most majestic destinations in the world to discover its allure. From touring the pyramids of Giza and taking in Cairo's antiquities, to cruising along the Nile and cooling off in coastal Alexandria, Egypt enthral.

PHOTOGRAPHY ELISE HASSEY

 @georgeepam

A view of the Sphinx and the Khafre Pyramid at the Giza Plateau in Cairo.

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Egypt casts a spell like no other: as a cradle of civilisation, a wellspring of inspiration and a bucket-list destination. But, as the pun goes, denial ain't just a river in Egypt. The country's tourism scene has been rocked by political instability and violence, yet intrepid travellers are once again trickling back to the land of the pharaohs. I join an expedition curated by Abercrombie & Kent. We scoot from the bustling charms of **Cairo** to the historical attractions of **Aswan** in the south to the coastal allure of **Alexandria** in the north, and all the legendary sights were humming with activity. The Egypt we encounter is safe, sophisticated and entirely welcoming.

Our odyssey begins at the Four Seasons Hotel Cairo at Nile Plaza. The elegant lodge, an oasis of serenity in this teeming metropolis of more than 20 million people, is located in a leafy quarter of the capital. Standing in the lobby, along with a small flock of fellow trekkers, is a man with an infectious grin, wavy hair and a passing resemblance to the late actor Robin Williams. "My name," he tells me, "is Hesham Abdulla and I will be your Egyptologist." It is music to my ears, not least because I am carrying a dog-eared copy of Toby Wilkinson's seminal book, *The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt*. Having an expert along for the ride is an absolute treat.

The first outing is a walking tour of Old Cairo with its mosques, minarets and markets. Sultan Hassan Mosque, a stately 14th-century building, is a standout with its four vaulted halls, ornate niches and mosaic floors. At Khan El-Khalili bazaar, an Aladdin's cave of textiles and trinkets, a wisecracking shopkeeper asks, "How can I take your money?" But I am distracted by a teenager who balances multiple loaves of bread on his head. At El Fishawy cafe, Cairenes are enjoying hibiscus juice and hookah, and an oud player performs. Hesham points out that Ramadan would soon begin, and with it a month of fasting. Later, I take an Uber to Zööba, a fast-casual eatery across town, for exceptional

ta'ameya, the local falafel made with fava beans instead of chickpeas.

The next day, in an air-conditioned van with an unflappable driver, we make the 30-minute commute past dusty residential buildings to the pyramids of Giza. Visibility is poor but when the necropolis comes into view it is staggering. Made from 2.3 million blocks and standing at 146 metres, the Great Pyramid of King Khufu was the tallest structure in the world for 44 centuries. Hordes of visitors scramble up the massive lower blocks, while others ride camels around the perimeter of the plateau or snap selfies with the Sphinx. How these architectural marvels were constructed is still a matter of intense debate, but Hesham confirms a vital ingredient: milk. "They sprinkled it under the pulleys, so they could pull the sleds carrying the rocks," he says.

Later that day, we are fortunate enough to be granted a preview of the Grand Egyptian Museum, scheduled to open this year. We begin in the atrium, ornamented with an imposing statue of Ramesses II, and proceed to an adjacent building where preservationists are avidly preparing antiquities. "For the first time since 1922, all of King Tutankhamun's 5,000-plus artefacts will be displayed," says our guide Faten Mohamed. As she speaks, I watch staff sprucing up the boy-king's gilded funerary beds, multicoloured faience necklaces, and gold and ivory fans missing their ostrich feathers. "He had eight fans," Mohamed says. How many fanners?, I ask. "Maybe two."



Egyptologist Hesham Abdulla explains the origins of the Dendera Temple complex, dedicated to the goddess Hathor, in the south of Egypt. **OPPOSITE (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT):** A walking tour of Old Cairo yields memorable views of mosques and minarets; a preservationist behind the scenes of the Grand Egyptian Museum; Anubis statue at the Egyptian Museum of Antiquities; the lobby at Four Seasons at the First Residence; inside the Sultan Hassan Mosque; Zööba is a popular eatery for Egyptian street food; tour leader Hesham Abdulla; fresh bread delivery at the Khan El-Khalili bazaar.





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Exterior of Dendera Temple complex.
OPPOSITE (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT):
Karnak Temple; Luxor Egypt statue of
Ramesses II in Karnak temple; the lounge
and dining room on the Zein Nile
Chateau; colourful inscriptions in the
Valley of the Kings; view of the
Nile from Sofitel Legend Old
Cataract Aswan; top deck of
the Zein; *koshari* prepared
by the boat's chef
(inset); Zein staff are
always on hand
with treats
(inset).

An oversized fan would have come in handy on the terrace of the Sofitel Legend Old Cataract Aswan, where we arrive the following day after a 90-minute flight. It is a sweltering 45°C in 'Upper Egypt' – named for the upper portion of the Nile – which underscores why it's advisable to visit between October and April. We take a motorboat to the island of Philae and the cinematic Temple of Isis, lovingly fashioned by the Ptolemies and the Romans – Egyptian culture evidently captivated the nation's conquerors too. With little shade, I begin melting. But before I can pray to the goddess Isis for relief, I am being spirited back to poolside cocktails at the Sofitel. The A&K team is excellent at striking the perfect balance between antiquity and urbanity.

That pitch-perfect mix is on display the following day, too. After a short flight from Aswan, we arrive at Abu Simbel, the jaw-dropping structure commissioned by Ramesses II more than 3,000 years ago. The larger of the two temples is fronted by four colossal statues of the acclaimed pharaoh and, perhaps even more impressive, the whole thing was dismantled and moved in the 1960s owing to Lake Nasser's rising water levels. Hours later I am admiring the silvery green water of the Nile as we board the Zein Nile Chateau, our floating residence for the next four days. Take that Ramesses.

The sleek *dahabiya*, equipped with every modern flourish you could desire, is available for private charters of up to 12 guests. As an acolyte of Ra, the sun god, my favourite feature is the top deck. Up here, you can't help but be immersed in the past as we glide by tropical riverbanks, lush farmlands and signs of life as beautiful as tomb paintings – from teenagers splashing in the water to locals riding donkeys into a village. Though it's a

sailboat, a tugboat pulls the craft along to maintain a smooth journey for its spoiled guests. If that isn't fancy enough, the Zein's staff, garbed in stylish grey *gallabiyyas*, are outstanding in anticipating every need, from a G&T to sunscreen.

As we sail to temples of the crocodile god Sobek at Kom Ombo and Horus the hawk at Edfu, with Hesham sharing fascinating morsels about the various deities and dynasties, I also have a chance to dig deeper into Egyptian cuisine. Chef Hosni Badawi is generous in explaining classics like *koshari*, a hearty dish of pasta, lentils and rice topped with spicy tomato sauce, and one morning he shows me how to prepare *baba ghanoush* from scratch. He is also adept at making desserts, including *kunafa*, a cream-filled string pastry confection, and *om ali*, a tastier version of bread-and-butter pudding. Maybe the only thing sweeter is the honeyed sunset that fills the sky every night.

Colour is mostly lacking from the temples we visit, faded or destroyed over time. So it is startling to encounter it at the Valley of the Kings. Many of the subterranean tombs still have technicoloured wall paintings. Seti I's tomb is especially majestic, inscribed with gorgeous images from the Book of the Dead and other ancient texts in blue, red and gold. Later that afternoon, we stop at a nearby alabaster studio, where artisans shape the pale mineral into fetching figurines that are dyed into equally brilliant shades.

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You can glimpse the Valley of the Kings from the windows of Sofitel Winter Palace Luxor. Built in 1886 by British explorers, it still has a palatial ambience with manicured gardens, stately furnishings and large marble bathrooms in the guest rooms. We bid adieu to our beloved boat – the crew sends us off with an animated Nubian song – and decamp to this hotel where Agatha Christie wrote *Death on the Nile*.

After a flight back to Cairo our whistle-stop tour continues apace. Next is Alexandria, a seaside city with cosmopolitan flair, with pastel-hued buildings, distinguished cafes like Trianon, and stellar seafood restaurants. Predictably, I fall hard for the pastries, including *aish el saraya*, a syrup-soaked confection topped with clotted cream and arrayed with pistachios. Similarly, while touring a local market, I am entranced by a baker hand-making *kunafa* dough, pouring it onto a hot metal surface.

At the Four Seasons Alexandria at San Stefano, a resort-like hotel with its own private stretch of sandy beach, we gather for a languorous lunch by the Mediterranean. We have sublime mezze, fattoush salad and grilled local prawns. Back at the main building, bedizened guests lounge by a disc-shaped pool, while yummy mummies file into the spa for pharaonic massages with mint and thyme. I am more interested in exploring the nearby Attarine district, with its labyrinth of antique stores. I am hoping to nab a pair of antique Syrian side tables, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, but I only find faux versions.

When I get back to Cairo, craftsmanship still on my mind, I make a beeline for Zamalek. The pedestrian-friendly enclave is peppered with design stores, art

galleries and atmospheric eateries. Abou El Sid, for one, is dressed up in 1940s kitsch. On our final night in Egypt, the group assembles for *iftar*, the evening meal where Muslims end their daily fast. This dinner is orchestrated by the Four Seasons at the First Residence. Situated along the west bank of the Nile, with green-filled vistas of the pyramids, the hotel has opulent rooms and top-notch service. Our sociable host, Hibba Bilal, explains specialties such as *kunafa nabulsi*, a dish that combines shredded filo pastry with stretchy cheese and a touch of red dye. It is sweet, savoury and surprising, just like Egypt. ✂

Abercrombie & Kent specialises in private and small group safaris to Egypt. The 14-day 'A Portrait of Egypt' includes stays in Cairo, Luxor, Aswan and Alexandria with a four-night cruise aboard the stylishly refurbished Sanctuary Sun Boat IV. Prices start from \$12,620 per person twin share. Sanctuary Zein Nile Chateau is available for exclusive charter only, for a minimum three nights. Total charter price for a three-night cruise for 12 guests is \$24,850. Contact Abercrombie & Kent on 1300 590 317 or abercrombiekent.com.au.

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Exploring the Karnak temple and its colossal columns.



CLOCKWISE: Alfresco dining at the Greek club in Alexandria; dine in opulent surrounds at the Four Seasons Alexandria (inset); grilled sucuk for lunch on the Zein; pastry-making at the markets in Alexandria; coastal vibes in Alexandria; big smiles from a village south of Luxor; which also boasts a tropical feel; *aish el saraya* pastry (inset); the gardens at the Sofitel Winter Palace, Luxor.