

THE PERFECT 10 ALEXANDRIA

Glories of the past
in Egypt's most
cosmopolitan city

SUSAN KUROSAWA

1 The name Alexandria has long existed in my imagination as a place of shimmering intrigue and lavish decrepitude. Founded by Alexander the Great in 331BC, the port city on the Mediterranean, northwest of Cairo, hit its cosmopolitan stride in the 19th century when immigrants flooded from southern Europe and the Levant. Then came the Suez crisis in 1956, Nasser's fiercely nationalistic rule, the exile of foreigners, especially Greeks and Jews, and the wane of the aristocracy. My imaginings owe much to Lawrence Durrell and his Alexandria Quartet, which I devoured in my late teens. How I longed to change my name to Justine, the romantic force of the set's first novel, she of the "sombre brow-dark gaze". To Durrell, Justine was indivisible from the city, its "true child ... neither Greek, Syrian, nor Egyptian, but a hybrid". But Durrell was writing in the late 1950s and early 60s, and the pre-war Alexandria of his novels was fast vanishing. Much of the city still feels illusory, with shambling buildings the colours of faded flowers propped up like movie sets. It doesn't seem an affectation when shopkeepers say, "Merci, shukran." It's a tilt at another time, a different place.

2 The 22km-long Corniche sweeps beside the eastern harbour in a sinuous curve, reminiscent of the Riviera city of Nice. It's not for nothing Alexandria is known, among other epithets, as the Pearl of the Mediterranean. The Corniche is its main tributary, the most stylish promenade, its beach precincts massed with rainbow-striped sun umbrellas in warm months. Old-timers play backgammon on rickety tables; food vendors wander and chairs are available for hire. Stanley Bay is a popular spot, with the ornamented Stanley Bridge swooping behind three levels of basic bathing cabins.

3 Despite myriad ruins, including a Roman amphitheatre, casually arrayed around the city like crumbling roundabouts, the crowning attraction is Bibliotheca Alexandrina, opened in 2002 on the (believed) destroyed site of the original Great Library, dating to 290BC, repository of hundreds of thousands of papyrus scrolls written by scholars of the likes of Euripides and Sophocles. Built from about 6000 grey granite boulders sourced from Aswan, the tilted disc-shaped roof references the sun rising on the shores of the Mediterranean and the open reading room, with capacity for 2000, is the world's largest. There are six specialised collections and four museums within the complex, including a planetarium, with all facets and skylights contoured to match the building's oval form; bibalex.org.

4 Atmosphere-laden cafes abound, many with an aspic-set atmosphere that suggests Durrell, or his fellow chronicler E.M. Forster, would have whiled away hours in such places. As we drop into a few of the best, local guide Al Zahraa Adel Awed ("Call me Zahraa!") proves the warmest leader imaginable, full of good cheer and insider info. On a sweet and savoury crawl, we tick off Trianon, beside Le Metro-pole Hotel, all wooden panelling and art deco murals, one-time haunt of the Alexandria-born poet C.P. Cavafy; Sofianopoulos Coffee Traders, where an ancient grinding machine rattles away; and 1920s Delices pastry shop, where mastika ice cream is ladled in irresistibly generous scoops and pastries are rich and sticky; tourguide_egypt@yahoo.com.

5 Fresh fruit stands are throughout the city, many propped under awnings across the Corniche from the beach clubs. Ingredients such as apples, citrus, mangoes, strawberries, and white peaches are pressed and pulped to order by chaps in jaunty jackets and peaked caps. El Kepossi,



Stanley Bay, above; Bibliotheca Alexandrina, far left; fresh fruit stand, left; Alexandria National Museum, below

IN THE KNOW

It's important to check travel advisories for Egypt before departure. Abercrombie & Kent has a 14-day escorted private A Portrait of Egypt journey, covering Cairo, Aswan, Upper Egypt, a Nile cruise aboard Sanctuary Sun Boat IV, Luxor and Alexandria. Best travel months are October to May; from \$11,375 a person, twin-share; add international airfares. Small group journeys are also available, such as a 10-day Egypt & the Nile itinerary, departing January 9.

- abercrombiekent.com.au
- egypt.travel
- smartraveller.gov.au

festooned with string bags of oranges, and manned by staff who call out like carnival spruikers, gets a big tick. Follow the crowds.

6 The antiques district centred on the souk-like Attarine Street is crammed to the gills with tiny stores, some selling nothing more than one or two ancient Bohemian crystal chandeliers. At the time of the Suez crisis, many foreign residents fled, leaving behind their household possessions. These old curiosity shops are wondrous caverns and real finds are not impossible; look for brass pieces, silver tea services and inlaid furniture and bargain with



SUSAN KUROSAWA

gusto. But as Alexandria is a major furniture-making hub, beware some antiques were, in fact, born yesterday.

7 The blue and white Fish Market is a restaurant at Bahary on the seafront of the Corniche, and not, as its stark name implies, the trading source of the morning's catch. Abundant seafood can be steamed, grilled or fried and try to snare a table with water and marina views. The bouillabaisse-style soup and paella topped with jumbo prawns are particularly good.

8 The Alexandria National Museum is smaller and more intimate than its name suggests. It's a three-storey Italianate building, formerly the US Consulate, and focuses on the ancient Egyptian, Coptic and Muslim worlds. The displays of jewellery, worn gold-threaded textiles and portraits tiled in mosaics are stunning, including a wild-eyed image of Queen Berenice II, with the prow of a warship on her head, an anchor-shaped brooch on her robes. I ask Zahraa its approximate age. "It's Ptolemaic. She ruled jointly with her husband Ptolemy III and died in 221BC," she says. It's all but impossible to process the immense span of history in Egypt and to believe that just below street level lie untouched ruins of a Ptolemaic and Roman settlement. But an hour later, down we go, into the Catacombs of Kom El-Shouqafa, dating from the second century. In this Greco-Roman burial site, the tombs are tiered, and funerary art and frescoes well preserved. We descend spiral steps that circle for about 30m around an open central shaft used to lower corpses into the tombs. Schoolkids racing past make jokes in French about Tomb Raiders as Zahraa tells us the complex was discovered in 1900 when a donkey fell through fragile earth just above; egyptianmuseums.net.

9 I don't have time for the full-day return drive west along the Mediterranean coast to Al Alamein, where decisive battles of World War II were played out, and to visit the Common-

wealth War Cemetery. But this oversight makes a compelling reason to return to a complex city that has captured my heart. And I did promise to go back and sit with Zahraa over coffee and talk to her about Cavafy's poetry. Besides, I owe her at least one more round of mastika ice cream.

BEST BEDS

10 Four Seasons Hotel Alexandria at San Stefano is a mixed residential and tourism property in an unparalleled position overlooking the Corniche towards the sea. It's bold in stature, a bit dated in architecture and decor, but full of fresh flowers and deeply comfortable. My seaview-category guestroom has a wide balcony, empire chairs, blue-toned floral fabrics and is impeccably maintained. The San Stefano district is the ritzy end of the Corniche and the additional drawcard for the hotel is its lovely beach club, with infinity pool and semi-al fresco restaurant and lounge, reached by private tunnel. Sip hibiscus juice and get stuck into a seafood platter as the sun sets, and maybe blow the budget on one of the 16 new villa-style beach suites with uninterrupted sea views. "On a clear day," my waiter laughs, "we can see Cyprus."

■ fourseasons.com

Susan Kurosawa was a guest of Abercrombie & Kent.

