



nileGUIDE

ALL YOU NEED TO PLAN YOUR PERFECT TRIP



Cairo for Kids

Cairo, 4 Days

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Guide Description



AUTHOR NOTE: Cairo is a super-hectic city, and if it's overwhelming for adults, it can be doubly so for kids. Add to that the fact that not all children are particularly interested in the difference between Mamluk and Ottoman Islamic architecture, or seeing the church where the Holy Family stayed, and you need to think of some other ways to keep your little cherubs amused. Luckily, most children will have learned about ancient Egypt at school, and so will probably be more interested in seeing the Pyramids and Tutankhamen's death mask than you are! The Cairo for kids trip lays out some of the other options available to you. It's worth mentioning that Egyptians love children, so your kids will be welcome pretty much wherever you take them. Make sure, however, that you protect them well from the sun, and always have some bottled water handy. This trip assumes you are staying in one of the nice hotel resorts out near the Pyramids, which are much more child-friendly than most Downtown hotels.

Itinerary Overview

things to do
restaurants
hotels
nightlife

Day 1 - Cairo

DAY NOTE: There's really only one place to begin your exploration of Cairo, and that is by visiting the Pyramids of Giza! Your hotel will be able to organise a taxi to take you there, and wait for you. If you are concerned about the heat, make sure to ask for an air-conditioned car. Your kids probably know more about the Pyramids than you do, so give them plenty of time to explore the site. It's well worth paying extra to enter one of the pyramids, but be warned that they are cramped, claustrophobic and very stuffy. There also isn't much to see inside, although children love the Indiana-Jones style experience! Your kids may also want to do a camel ride around the complex, which can be great fun, and provides opportunity for some brilliant photos. Make sure you negotiate the price in advance, though: 20 LE is more than sufficient. Bear in mind that you have the chance to do a camel ride around the outside of the pyramid complex this evening (if your children are adventurous enough), so don't worry if you decide not to take a ride right now. If your little'uns are at all interested in boats, don't miss the Solar Boat Museum. After this, head down to the Sphinx. Inside the compound, if you get your angles right, you can take some great photos of your children kissing the Sphinx and patting him on the head! For lunch, have your driver take you to the nearby Felfela restaurant, on the Cairo-Alexandria road. This is a good introduction to Egyptian food – clean, and not too heavy. You should be able to find something that your kids will like here, and the staff are very friendly. If you are worried about introducing Egyptian food so early on, you could opt for a pizza at the Pizza Hut opposite the Sphinx instead. Spend the afternoon relaxing at the hotel pool – it's best to take things nice and slowly in the heat. In the evening, a lovely thing to do is to take a sunset camel ride in the desert next to the Pyramids. Your hotel should be able to organise something for you; if not, ask around at the stables near the Sphinx. Camels can be quite daunting sometimes for children, because they are so tall. However, once you are up, they are perfectly safe, since they walk very slowly and tend to be quite gentle creatures. It's easily possible to fit two on a camel, so you can double up and ride with your child if you want. Sunset from the desert, as the Call to Prayer echoes around you, is a magical experience, made even better by the wonderful view of the Pyramids that you get! Spend the rest of the evening relaxing in your hotel, and perhaps take your dinner there too.



The Great Pyramid

Last remaining ancient wonder of the world



Pyramid of Khafre (Chephren)

Limestone cap still intact



Pyramid of Menkaure (Mycerinus)

Small but perfectly formed



Solar Boat Museum

Pharaoh's cruise boat to the afterlife



The Sphinx

Haunting, mysterious and iconic



Felfela

Popular chain serving up traditional Egyptian staples



Camel Ride by the Pyramids

Sail back in time on a ship of the desert

Day 2 - Cairo

DAY NOTE: Start day 2 by heading to the Egyptian Museum as early as possible. Aim to be there before 9 am in order to beat the tour groups. The museum is amazing, with ancient treasures around every corner, but it can be quite overwhelming. It may be worth hiring a guide here, to help you make sense of all the exhibits, very few of which are labelled. Your guide will also be able to answer all your children's questions, and keep them entertained with lurid stories of ancient Egypt when they start to flag. From a child's point of view, the big draw of the museum is the Tutankhamen exhibit: it's probably worth heading there straight away, so the kids can get some time alone with the gold death mask before the hordes of other tourists arrive. Children also really like the spooky mummy room, although you do have to pay more to enter. A free alternative is the animal mummy room, for mummified fish, crocodiles and even a monkey! After the museum, have your driver take you to Khan al-Khalili. Your kids will love wandering around the narrow, winding lanes and rummaging through the piles of brightly coloured souvenirs. Perhaps even give them a budget and let them do their own haggling! Khan al-Khalili can be a bit full on, so keep a close eye on your kids to make sure they are not starting to freak out. If so, whisk them in to al-Fishawi coffee shop for a well-earned rest; it's probably wise to keep them away from the shisha pipes though! For lunch, you could try the Egyptian Pancake House: they serve traditional sweet and savoury feteers, which are not dissimilar to crepes. You can eat with your hands, and make a fine old mess! Late afternoon, head to Maadi to take a sunset felucca ride. You can pick up a felucca near to the Sultana Boat, and spend an hour or so cruising the river. It's a beautiful way to end the day, and Maadi is the best place to take a felucca ride since there are no bridges to obstruct you. Figure on paying about 50 LE for an hour's sail (you can get it cheaper if you bargain hard, but 50 is a fair price for everyone involved). Either take dinner somewhere in Maadi, such as the Grand Café on the Nile cornice, or head back to your hotel for some rest.

Itinerary Overview

things to do
restaurants
hotels
nightlife



Egyptian Museum

Awe-inspiring display of pharaonic artefacts



Khan el-Khalili Bazaar

Beating heart of Islamic Cairo



Al-Fishawi Coffee Shop

The beating heart of Khan al-Khalili



Egyptian pancake house

Traditional Egyptian pancakes in Khan al Khalili bazaar



Felucca Ride on the Nile

Chill out and sail on the longest river in the world



Grand Cafe

Open-air oriental café serving shisha, beer and food

DAY NOTE: Today it's time to get pharaonic again! Head to Dr Ragab's Pharaonic Village some time in the morning, and spend a few hours exploring this ancient Egyptian theme park. It's a magical living museum, where you take a boat trip around the waterways of Jacob's island, and are transported back to the time of the ancient Egyptians. The village is both educational and fun, and children absolutely love it. You can even get dressed up in pharaonic clothing, and have your pictures taken! After this, you may want to complete your visit by popping in to the nearby Dr Ragab's Papyrus Institute. Although this is a papyrus gallery more than anything else, you do learn about how the plant is grown and made in to paper, and what its significance was to the ancient Egyptians. If you are planning to buy some papyrus, this isn't a bad place to do it: it is expensive, but the papyrus is of high quality. If you fancy being adventurous, perhaps take a late lunch in Abou Tarek's koshary restaurant. This is the most traditional Egyptian food, and very child friendly: a mix of pasta, lentils, chickpeas, fried onions and tomato sauce. Just go easy on the chilli! Return to your hotel to relax for the afternoon, before finishing up your time in Cairo with a final visit to the Pyramids: go to see the Sound and Light show, and listen to the Sphinx narrate the history of ancient Egypt. Perfect material for your children's next history project!

Day 3 - Cairo

DAY NOTE: Today it's time to reward your kids for their patience so far! Spend the day at Dream Park, part of the Dreamland development near to the Pyramids. It's the Middle East's largest theme park, and is safe, clean, and very modern. It has rides and games to suit all ages, including roller-coasters, laser quest, and dodgem cars. There are plenty of restaurants there, and also nice, tranquil places to relax. Go on – unleash your own hidden kid! In the evening, head to the Wikala al-Ghuri to see the free Sufi dancing show. Sufis are Muslims who believe they can obtain a personal relationship with God through various religious practices, one of which is an ecstatic dance in which the Sufi continuously spins around and around. The show starts at 8.30, so you should arrive by 8.00 in order to get good seats. Spectacular spinning colours ... you can have your own sufi dancing competition when you get back to the hotel! NB the show is only on Wednesday and Saturday nights.



Dream Park

150 acres of family fun



Wikalet al-Ghuri

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



Dr. Ragab's Pharaonic Village

Experience ancient Egyptian life at this living museum



Dr. Ragab's Papyrus Institute

The ABC's of Papyrus Explained



Abou Tarek Koshary Restaurant

Most famous koshary restaurant in Cairo



Giza Pyramids: Sound and Light Show

Cheesy but spectacular, and definitely memorable

Day 4 - Cairo

Day 1 - Cairo

QUICK NOTE

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contact:

tel: +20 2 383 8823

<http://www.egypt.travel/index.php>

location:

Giza Plateau
Cairo 12561

1 The Great Pyramid

DESCRIPTION: What can be said about the most iconic, and controversial, building in the world? The Pyramid of Khufu, most commonly known as the Great Pyramid of Giza, is the only one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world that is still standing.

It is believed to have been built during the reign of 4th Dynasty pharaoh Khufu (known as Cheops in Greek), and completed round about 2560 BC. Constructed from an estimated 2.3 million blocks of sandstone, and with an estimated total mass of nearly 6 million tonnes, the Pyramid of Khufu has to be seen to be believed. Awe-inspiring does not even come close to describing the Great Pyramid, and it is still not known how the ancient Egyptians built it (assuming they even did)!

Furthermore, many researchers don't believe it was a tomb after all – other explanations include astronomical observatory, centre of cult initiation, and representation of the earth's physical properties. Decide for yourself as you soak up the magic and majesty of this timeless monument.

Along with the Pyramids of Khafre (Chephren) and Menkaure (Mycerinus), and of course the Sphinx, the Pyramid of Khufu is part of the Giza Pyramids Complex. Make sure you also



find the time to check out the Solar Boat Museum next to the Pyramid of Khufu.

The best way to visit the Giza Plateau is by taxi. © NileGuide

contact:

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

<http://www.touregypt.net/chephren.htm>

location:

Giza Pyramids Plateau
Cairo 12561

2 Pyramid of Khafre (Chephren)

DESCRIPTION: The Pyramid of Chephren (or Khafre, in ancient Egyptian) is the second largest of the three pyramids at Giza, and is sometimes known as the Second Pyramid. It appears larger than the Pyramid of Khufu, but that is because it is built on higher ground and the peak is still intact. It is believed to have been built during the reign of 4th dynasty pharaoh Khafre, thought by most archaeologists to be Khufu's son. Unlike the Great Pyramid, the Pyramid of Khafre still has the remains of the limestone casing stones at the top – these would have protected the pyramid and given it a brilliant iridescent glow that could allegedly be seen from the mountains of Israel. The pyramid is linked by a causeway to the Great Sphinx – you can walk down this causeway, though you can't enter in to the compound of the Sphinx from here (you have to skirt around the outer wall).

You can usually go inside the Pyramid of Chephren for a small fee, and follow a steep and claustrophobic passage all the way down to the burial chamber. There is not much to see, but the sensation of being inside such a huge physical mass is an incredible experience.

The best way to visit the Giza Plateau is by taxi. © NileGuide



contact:

tel: +20 2 383 8823

location:

Giza Pyramids Plateau
Cairo 12561

3 Pyramid of Menkaure (Mycerinus)

DESCRIPTION: The Pyramid of Mycerinus (or Menkaure, in ancient Egyptian) is the baby of the three Pyramids of Giza, if you can call something 108 m long and 67 m high a baby! Like the Pyramids of Khufu and Chephren, the Pyramid of Menkaure was built during the 4th dynasty, and so is well over 4000 years old! Not much is known of Menkaure, though he was believed to have been another of Khufu's sons, and successor to Khafre. The Pyramid of Mycerinus is set back from the other two pyramids, about a 15 minute walk away. It therefore receives fewer visitors than its two bigger brothers, but is well worth checking out. Many observers claim that, when viewed on its own, the Pyramid of Mycerinus exudes an almost palpable sense of power – far more than that of the other two. Because it is smaller, and so easier to comprehend, the effects of the geometry are magnified. Make sure you go to experience this example of pyramid power for yourself!

The best way to visit the Giza Plateau is by taxi. © NileGuide



photo courtesy of Richardavis

contact:

tel: +20 (0)2 391 3454 (Tourist Information)
http://www.egyptvoyager.com/museums_solar.htm

location:

Giza Pyramids Plateau
Cairo 12561

4

Solar Boat Museum

DESCRIPTION: The ancient Egyptians believed the dead pharaoh would join the Sun God in his solar boat to sail through the underworld. In 1954 an actual solar boat (or barque) was found in a sealed pit next to the Pyramid of Khufu. The boat was made of cedar wood and almost perfectly preserved, although disassembled in to over 1000 pieces. A team of archaeologists spent over 10 years reconstructing the boat, which is now on display in the Solar Boat Museum, next to the Great Pyramid.

The boat is a remarkable feat of engineering – about 40 m long and with a displacement of around 400 tonnes! It is not known whether the boat played a purely symbolic function, or whether it actually served as Khufu's ship of state. There is some physical evidence that suggests the boat actually sailed at sea!

The Solar Boat Museum houses a number of artefacts found in the pit, as well as the reconstructed boat itself. It also has an interesting photo exhibition detailing the immense amount of work that went into the salvage operation. The best way to visit the Giza Plateau is by taxi. © NileGuide



photo courtesy of mcoughlin

contact:

tel: +20 2 383 8823
<http://www.egypt.travel/index.php>

location:

Giza Pyramids Plateau
Cairo 12561

5

The Sphinx

DESCRIPTION: Like the Pyramid of Khufu, the Sphinx (often known as the Great Sphinx) is simultaneously one of the best known and yet most controversial monuments in the world. With the body of a lion seamlessly blending in to a human head, the Sphinx is carved from a single piece of in-situ rock 73 m long and 20 m high. It is sublimely beautiful, and has struck wonder into the hearts of visitors through the ages. It is believed to be a solar symbol, possibly representing the unity of matter and consciousness, the physical and spiritual realms. Conventional wisdom dictates that the Sphinx was constructed by Chephren (builder of the Second Pyramid), and it is true that the Valley Temple next to the Sphinx is linked to the Pyramid of Chephren. However, an alternative view – backed by geological evidence – suggests the Sphinx is much older than the normal 4th Dynasty date ascribed it, perhaps having been built as early as 10,000 BC. Adding to the mystery, a number of esoteric groups believe that the mythical "Hall of Records" is located beneath the Sphinx, containing the secret knowledge of the ancient Egyptians.

Whatever the truth of these claims, the allure of this moving monument will continue. The best way to visit the Giza Plateau is by taxi. © NileGuide



contact:

tel: +20 (0)2 2392 2833

location:

Talaat Harb Street
Cairo 11111

hours:

Daily 7a-12:30a

6 Felfela

OUR LOCAL EXPERT SAYS:

Felfela is a good, safe introduction to traditional Egyptian cuisine.

DESCRIPTION: Beloved of tourists and locals alike, Felfela is a Cairo fast food institution. On the right as you head up Talaat Harb street towards the midan, Felfela is a simple, brightly coloured and brightly lit restaurant that offers a whole range of Egyptian street food classics.

You can get koshary (with or without meat), chicken or beef shawerma, different types of taamiya and felafel sandwiches, all sorts of fuul... simply name your staple!

Although it's a bit more expensive than the proper dive restaurants offering this food, Felfela is still cheap, and reassuringly hygienic.

The way it works is easy: you order and pay at the cash desk, and the staff will give you a ticket. (Felfela has menus in English, and the staff speak English too.) You take your ticket to the appropriate part of the restaurant (the staff will tell you where to go if you aren't sure), and swap it for some food! You can either eat amongst the other customers, standing up at the waist-height counters, or take your food to go. Either way, it's delicious!

Felfela is set right amongst the action of Downtown Cairo. Afterwards, why not head to the nearby Stella Bar, Horeya, or Odeon Palace Bar, and grab yourself a local beer to wash your food down!

There is also a proper sit down version of the restaurant just around the corner on Hoda Sharaawy Street. © NileGuide



contact:

tel: 20 (0)16 5070288
<http://ridingtourism.com/units/fb-stables>

location:

FB stables
Cairo

7 Camel Ride by the Pyramids

OUR LOCAL EXPERT SAYS:

Hold on tight as your camel stands up and sits down!

DESCRIPTION: Many people who visit the Pyramids choose to do a camel ride around the enclosure there. A better idea is to do a camel ride into the desert behind the Pyramids. You get fantastic views of the Pyramids, and can imagine you are part of an old trade caravan, travelling across the desert to sell your wares in far off, exotic locations.

There is nothing quite like a camel ride in the desert: you will really start to appreciate the power and beauty of these haughtily majestic creatures, as you sway from side to side on the camel's back, lulled both by the hypnotic motion and the monotonous beauty of the desert.



Many stables near the Sphinx can offer camel rides. FB Stables are highly recommended: they are used to dealing with tourists, are friendly and responsible, and their camels are in good shape. You can organise any sort of trip with them, from a one hour jaunt around the desert, to a multi-day safari. One of the best times to do a camel ride is for sunset: as well as a magnificent view of the Pyramids, you will hear the beautifully mournful evening Call to Prayer from hundreds of mosques at the same time. Pure magic! © NileGuide

Day 2 - Cairo

QUICK NOTE

DAY NOTE: Start day 2 by heading to the Egyptian Museum as early as possible. Aim to be there before 9 am in order to beat the tour groups. The museum is amazing, with ancient treasures around every corner, but it can be quite overwhelming. It may be worth hiring a guide here, to help you make sense of all the exhibits, very few of which are labelled. Your guide will also be able to answer all your children's questions, and keep them entertained with lurid stories of ancient Egypt when they start to flag. From a child's point of view, the big draw of the museum is the Tutankhamen exhibit: it's probably worth heading there straight away, so the kids can get some time alone with the gold death mask before the hordes of other tourists arrive. Children also really like the spooky mummy room, although you do have to pay more to enter. A free alternative is the animal mummy room, for mummified fish, crocodiles and even a monkey! After the museum, have your driver take you to Khan al-Khalili. Your kids will love wandering around the narrow, winding lanes and rummaging through the piles of brightly coloured souvenirs. Perhaps even give them a budget and let them do their own haggling! Khan al-Khalili can be a bit full on, so keep a close eye on your kids to make sure they are not starting to freak out. If so, whisk them in to al-Fishawi coffee shop for a well-earned rest; it's probably wise to keep them away from the shisha pipes though! For lunch, you could try the Egyptian Pancake House: they serve traditional sweet and savoury feteers, which are not dissimilar to crepes. You can eat with your hands, and make a fine old mess! Late afternoon, head to Maadi to take a sunset felucca ride. You can pick up a felucca near to the Sultana Boat, and spend an hour or so cruising the river. It's a beautiful way to end the day, and Maadi is the best place to take a felucca ride since there are no bridges to obstruct you. Figure on paying about 50 LE for an hour's sail (you can get it cheaper if you bargain hard, but 50 is a fair price for everyone involved). Either take dinner somewhere in Maadi, such as the Grand Café on the Nile cornice, or head back to your hotel for some rest.

contact:

tel: +20 2 579 6974

fax: +20 2 579 4596

<http://www.egyptianmuseum.gov.eg/>

location:

Tahrir Square
Giza 11728

1 Egyptian Museum

OUR LOCAL EXPERT SAYS:

Most tour groups visit in the afternoon – so come in the morning to avoid the crowds.

DESCRIPTION: Also known as the Egyptian Museum of Antiquities, the Egyptian Museum arguably has the most masterpieces per square inch of any museum in the world! Over 120,000 objects are on display, with many more in storage.

The Egyptian Museum covers over 3000 years of pharaonic history, from pre-dynastic Egypt to the Ptolemies. It's huge, and can be confusing, so consider hiring one of the knowledgeable guides from the museum. However you organise the visit, look out for the diorite stature of Khafra (Chephren) on the ground floor, as well as the only known statue of Khufu, builder of the Great Pyramid. Ironically, the statue is tiny! Also make sure not to miss the strange Amarna art of the 'heretical' pharaoh Akhenaten.

Upstairs are the Tutankhamun exhibits – prepare to be blown away by the sheer opulence of the funerary offerings, including, of course, the golden death mask! Although it costs extra, the mummy room is well worth a look – spooky and awe-inspiring at the same time. Finally, check out the animal mummies – there's fish, crocodiles and even a cheeky little monkey.



The Egyptian Museum is in Downtown Cairo, just off Tahrir Square and behind the Nile Hotel. If you don't fancy a taxi, you can easily get here by Metro – get off at Sadat Station and follow the signs. © NileGuide

location:

Off Hussein Square
Cairo 11211

2 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

hours:

24 hours daily

3 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 (mashrabiya) 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: 2024505871

location:
Midan Hussein
Cairo

hours:
Daily 11a-2a

4 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

location:

Maadi ferry, next to Grand
Café
Cairo

Felucca Ride on the Nile

OUR LOCAL EXPERT SAYS:

The best time to do a felucca ride is at sunset.

DESCRIPTION: The Greek historian Herodotus described Egypt as the "gift of the Nile". One of the best things to do in Cairo is go for a sail on the Nile on a felucca. A felucca is a traditional Egyptian sailing boat, that can be crewed by just one man.

Sailing the Nile on a felucca is one of the few ways to escape the chaos of Cairo, and actually get some peace and quiet! All you can hear is the gentle lapping of the water against the hull, and the flapping of the sails (OK, you will probably still hear some traffic, but it will be muted)! Time ceases to have any meaning, since you are at the mercy of the elements. There are a number of places to do a felucca ride in Cairo, such as from opposite the Grand Hyatt hotel, but the best place is down in Maadi. There are no bridges here to interrupt your sailing, and it is a lot more peaceful. You can pick up a felucca from the local ferry port on the cornice, next to the Grand Café. The standard charge for tourists is 60 LE for an hour, though you can certainly bargain this down. Note that you should also tip the captain on top. You can do a felucca ride at any time of day or night, but by far the best time to do it is for sunset. © NileGuide



contact:

tel: 20 2 451 2316

location:

Merryland Gardens
Cairo

5 Grand Cafe

OUR LOCAL EXPERT SAYS:

Check out the other branches in Giza, 6th October City and Maadi

DESCRIPTION: Set in an attractive garden overlooking an artificial lake, this branch of the popular Asian cafe is always buzzing with young Cairenes. The tables are scattered amongst trees and shrubs giving customers both pleasant surroundings and modicum of privacy. An in-house DJ spins Arabic pop tunes every night. © wcities.com



wcities

Day 3 - Cairo

QUICK NOTE

DAY NOTE: Today it's time to reward your kids for their patience so far! Spend the day at Dream Park, part of the Dreamland development near to the Pyramids. It's the Middle East's largest theme park, and is safe, clean, and very modern. It has rides and games to suit all ages, including roller-coasters, laser quest, and dodgem cars. There are plenty of restaurants there, and also nice, tranquil places to relax. Go on – unleash your own hidden kid! In the evening, head to the Wikala al-Ghuri to see the free Sufi dancing show. Sufis are Muslims who believe they can obtain a personal relationship with God through various religious practices, one of which is an ecstatic dance in which the Sufi continuously spins around and around. The show starts at 8.30, so you should arrive by 8.00 in order to get good seats. Spectacular spinning colours ... you can have your own sufi dancing competition when you get back to the hotel! NB the show is only on Wednesday and Saturday nights.

contact:

tel: +20 2 855 3191
<http://www.dreamparkegypt.com>

location:

Oasis Road
6th of October City

1 Dream Park

DESCRIPTION: This fantastic 60-hectare (150-acre) theme park is one of the largest recreational facilities in the Middle East. There is certainly plenty to do with three areas for children, teenagers and families—all with a multitude of rides and attractions. Don't miss the fantastic condor flight. If you're feeling exhausted after all that excitement, pay a visit to one of the park's 22 restaurants, offering everything from pizza to kebab. © wcities.com

contact:

tel: +20 (0)2 2285 4509
(Tourist Information)
fax: +20 (0)2 2285 4363
(Tourist Information)

location:

Muhammad 'Abduh Street
Cairo 11211

2 Wikalet al-Ghuri

OUR LOCAL EXPERT SAYS:

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

DESCRIPTION: The Wikalet al-Ghuri, in Islamic Cairo, was built in the 16th Century by Qansuh al-Ghuri, the penultimate Mamluk sultan. A Wikala was a warehouse and merchants hostel, and the Wikalet al-Ghuri 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-Ghuri 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



photo courtesy of kudumomo

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

Day 4 - Cairo

QUICK NOTE

DAY NOTE: Today it's time to get pharaonic again! Head to Dr Ragab's Pharaonic Village some time in the morning, and spend a few hours exploring this ancient Egyptian theme park. It's a magical living museum, where you take a boat trip around the waterways of Jacob's island, and are transported back to the time of the ancient Egyptians. The village is both educational and fun, and children absolutely love it. You can even get dressed up in pharaonic clothing, and have your pictures taken! After this, you may want to complete your visit by popping in to the nearby Dr Ragab's Papyrus Institute. Although this is a papyrus gallery more than anything else, you do learn about how the plant is grown and made in to paper, and what its significance was to the ancient Egyptians. If you are planning to buy some papyrus, this isn't a bad place to do it: it is expensive, but the papyrus is of high quality. If you fancy being adventurous, perhaps take a late lunch in Abou Tarek's koshary restaurant. This is the most traditional Egyptian food, and very child friendly: a mix of pasta, lentils, chickpeas, fried onions and tomato sauce. Just go easy on the chilli! Return to your hotel to relax for the afternoon, before finishing up your time in Cairo with a final visit to the Pyramids: go to see the Sound and Light show, and listen to the Sphinx narrate the history of ancient Egypt. Perfect material for your children's next history project!

contact:

tel: +20 2 571 8675
fax: +20 2 568 9266
<http://www.pharaonicvillage.com/>

location:

3 El Bahr El Aazam St
Cairo 12561

1

Dr. Ragab's Pharaonic Village

DESCRIPTION: Accessible only by boat, this private tourist project on an island in the Nile south of the Giza Bridge attempts to simulate life and work in ancient Egypt. Some find the living museum campy, but most will enjoy the two-hour boat tour past costumed performers acting out ancient Egyptian agriculture, crafts and industries. There is also a mock temple and several museums. The acres of papyrus swamps are a botanist's delight, and the two cafes and children's playground make the island an ideal family daytrip. All tours are multilingual. © wcities.com



photo courtesy of i_fouad2004

contact:

tel: +20 2 336 7212 / +20 2 348 9035 / +20 2 349 9133
<http://www.touregypt.net/village/history.htm>

location:

El-Nil Street
Cairo 11211

2

Dr. Ragab's Papyrus Institute

DESCRIPTION: The ancient Egyptian craft of papyrus-making died out around the 10th century AD but was revived over 1,000 years later by Dr. Ragab, who conceived the idea of building a museum to demonstrate its ancient techniques. Here you will see papyrus go from grass to decorated wall piece and all the steps in between. The museum details the papyrus making process and its attached art gallery regularly holds exhibitions. More than anything, the boat functions as a papyrus showroom with some of the most expensive, though best quality, papyrus art in Egypt. © wcities.com



Photo by RogueSun Media

contact:

tel: +20 (0)2 2577 5935 / +20
(0)2 2576 1911
fax: +20 2 576 1911
<http://www.aboutarek.com/>

location:

16 Champollion Street, on
corner of Maarouf Street
Cairo

hours:

Daily 7.30a-mid

3

About Tarek Koshary Restaurant

DESCRIPTION: Abou Tarek is one of the most famous restaurants in Cairo, if not the whole of Egypt. It's not the sort of place you go to for a lingering, four course meal, because it really serves only one thing: koshary.

Koshary is the best contender for Egypt's national dish, and it's certainly the food that Egyptians living abroad miss the most. Koshary is a carbohydrate bomb: a mixture of different types of pasta, mixed with lentils, chickpeas, fried onions and a sort of tomato salsa. You then season it to taste, with a combination of chilli sauce and a surprisingly fiery lime juice and garlic concoction. It's fast food at its best: cheap, filling, and surprisingly tasty.

While you can get koshary on pretty much any street corner in Cairo, the koshary at Abou Tarek is particularly tasty. There's a high turnover of customers, so it's always freshly made, and pleasingly moist. As befits this no-frills dish, Abou Tarek restaurant is a simple affair: long metal trestle tables, with a splash of greenery about the walls.

Service is very quick, and the staff are used to tourists and are pretty welcoming. The only choice you have to make is whether you want a small or large dish of koshary, and what the best drink is to counteract the burning throat induced by a reckless dollop of chilli sauce! © NileGuide



Photo courtesy of Abou Tarek Koshary

contact:

tel: +20 (0)2 386 3469 / +20
(0)2 385 2880 / +20 (0)2
285 4509 (Egyptian Tourist
Authority)
fax: +20 (0)2 384 4257 / +20
(0)2 285 4363 (Egyptian
Tourist Authority)
[http://www.egypt.travel/index.
php](http://www.egypt.travel/index.php)

location:

Giza Pyramids Plateau
Cairo 12561

4

Giza Pyramids: Sound and Light Show

DESCRIPTION: The commentary might not impress you, but the dazzling light show and awe-inspiring backdrop of the Sphinx and Pyramids surely will. Three times a night in three different languages, the Sphinx plays the role of storyteller, narrating the history of ancient Egypt. Shows are held in English, French, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Russian and Arabic. Call ahead to check the time of the performance you want to attend; private viewing times can be arranged. The desert's cold in the evenings, so make sure to carry along something to keep you warm. © wcities.com



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 luau 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, Mohandeseen, 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 "Ramesses' 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."
© NileGuide

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 mashrabiya 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 Corniche, 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, wholegrain "baladi" bread; and thinner, whiteshami 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. *Fuddruckers* 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 Mohandeseen 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 dress 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. Memento, 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 hordes 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-Souhaimi.

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 towards 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-Refai 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 afelucca 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												
Rainy Days	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0
Rain Fall (cm)												
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)												
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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