

# Cairo, Egypt: Home of the Pyramids

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Say the name Cairo, and for many people, one thing comes to mind -- the **Pyramids of Giza** that dominate the city's western edge.

But there's **so much more to Cairo** than that, as we discovered on our recent visit.

The first thing we learnt is that Cairo has rules all of its own, particularly when it comes to driving. Trust me, **you do not want to rent a car in Cairo!** If a freeway has five lanes, the drivers using it will manage to carve out eight lanes for themselves. See an inch of space in between vehicles, and that will soon be gone, as someone forces their way into it. As if that wasn't bad enough, there are even people crossing the road, as cars hurtle towards them. It's an experience I'm not keen to relive in a hurry!

The second thing you notice is that **Cairo is an extremely busy place**, but that's no surprise, given that it's home to something like 22 million people. Not only are there people everywhere, but flats seem to spring up from all over the place. As a well known tax dodge, people only complete certain floors, leaving others above them empty, so they don't have to pay tax on them. It's a weird sight, and I certainly can't ever imagine having a home with floors above me open to the elements.

Of course, this many people and vehicles creates problems of its own, most notably pollution. Although it's clear when you look out over the city, to be honest, it didn't bother us as much as we thought it might. Another issue is congestion, and it wasn't unusual for our visits to the center of Cairo from our hotel near the pyramids in Giza to **take an hour of crawling along the main road** into the city. However, that brings delights of its own, allowing plenty of time to see the architecture, and advertising billboards that line the route.

One thing that did fascinate me about Cairo was the **mixture of Western with Middle Eastern cultures**. It's interesting how you can develop pre-conceptions about a country that you've never visited and that was definitely the case with Egypt. I assumed, wrongly as it turned out, that there would be few traces of a Western influence, but nothing could be further from the truth. It was fascinating to see products familiar in Europe being advertised out here, complete with their names in English, and then the advertising slogan in Arabic!

Much of **central Cairo is located alongside the River Nile**, although

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this wasn't the Nile that I expected. I had the idea that it would be a bustling, thriving waterway, breathing life into the city, but not a bit of it. Instead, it actually becomes quite cramped as it runs through Cairo, complete with its own island in the middle, where we were told by our guides that Christians and Muslims live happily side by side, with mosques and churches next door to each other. Road and rail bridges criss-cross the river, meaning you can forget any idea of large ships being able to sail through here. It's actually a shame, as I'd love to have seen more life here.

Perhaps the **most common sight in Cairo were mosques**, with one almost everywhere you looked. I was absolutely fascinated by their architecture, and we decided to spend one of our days in the city exploring some of the best that Cairo has to offer.

The **Citadel** is located to the southeast of the city, and can be seen from some distance away. Located on top of a hilltop, offering some smog-filled views of Cairo, the complex is surrounded by a wall built by Saladin in the late 12th century. It went on to become home to Egypt's rulers from shortly afterwards until the mid 19th century. It was still in use by the military until 1952, but after that, it started to fall into disrepair. Sadly, that continued until the early 1980s, and since then, they've been working hard to try and restore the place. When we visited, evidence of that was all around. It's a shame they let it fall into such a state, but it's an all too familiar story at many places around the world.

The major attraction here is the **Mosque of Mohammed Ali**, which immediately reminded us of some of the Russian Orthodox churches we've seen in Scandinavia, with huge domes, and that's where some of the inspiration came from for this. As the name suggests, it was built by Mohammed Ali, who ruled Egypt from 1805 until 1849, and is credited with making the country a superpower again during his time in command.

Inside, the mosque is just as beautiful as the exterior suggests, with **hundreds of lamps dangling from the domed ceiling above**. The ceiling itself had some beautiful decoration, suggesting skies and stars, but despite the size of the room, it still had a very intimate feel to it. It's somewhere you could easily imagine following your faith, as it felt very welcoming.

The next mosque we visited was one that had seen some prestigious visitors in the past, including President Barack Obama. The **Mosque of Sultan Hassan** was chosen as the location for his keynote speech during his visit to the city. A much older mosque, this dates back to the 14th century, but unlike Mohammed Ali, the founder of this mosque did

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not have such a happy association with the city. Originally intended to be Hassan's mausoleum, he never saw it completed. When one of the mosque's minarets collapsed, killing hundreds, the people turned against him, and he was murdered before work was completed.

At least the mausoleum was put to good use, for Hassan's son, and that's just as well, as it's the real highlight here. The ceiling decoration, which looks from ground level to be gold at least, turns out to be **nothing more elaborate than wood**, and we were staggered that it looked so good after so long.

Almost opposite is the **Mosque of Ar-Rifai**, just as imposing on the outside, but less impressive on the inside. It's got a more impressive pedigree as a mausoleum, with the tombs of the last Shah of Iran, and the exiled King Farouk, who was the last Egyptian king. It was fascinating to see both tombs, and to realise the recent history that was represented in front of us.

The parts of Islamic Cairo we saw were only small areas of the city. There's so much more to the place, as you'd expect from any **good capital city**, with plenty to keep the visitor entertained. Perhaps one of the biggest attractions is the Egyptian Museum, which we'll be looking at in a future PassPorter News article.

*About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)*

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