

# Walk like an Egyptian ... Cairo - crazy and charming

By Tertia Butcher

Egypt is as old as mankind, it is dirty, chaotic and noisy – very noisy.

Dubai is less than 50 years old, it is pristine, orderly and shiny – very impressive.

Egypt has a heartbeat; Dubai has no soul.

Our escorted Travelscene Hay tour has just returned from Egypt and Dubai, and while close neighbours, the two countries are poles apart when it comes to culture and winning your heart.

This was my third visit to Egypt, and I will return many more times.

Dubai gets my tick for 'been there, done that'.

Unfortunately it seems the whole world agrees with me.

In the 12 years since I last visited Egypt tourism must have increased by a thousand per cent. Everyone wants to see the place, and I don't blame them – but I hate the queues this has created.

Despite the dust, grime, the honking of cars (illegal in Dubai!) and chaos on the roads – everyone loves Egypt.

It is quite normal for motorists to turn a three-lane highway in Egypt into five lanes and the only vehicles younger than 20 years were the tourist buses (Dubai donates its old cars - older than three years - to developing countries like Egypt).

Most of the cars I saw in Cairo took me straight back to the 50s and 60s.

Amid all the chaos, cars breaking down, honking and traffic nightmares, we never saw a single car accident. There was evidence of one when a red sedan sailed past our mini bus – its rear bumper missing but sticking out the back windows of the car, upside down!

My blood curdled over breakfast one morning when I looked out the restaurant window in Cairo, watching a car drive up a three-lane ramp to cross the Nile River. When the driver got to the top of the ramp where he had to turn onto the bridge, he must have realised that he was on the wrong road. Undaunted, he reversed to the bottom of the kilometre long ramp – into oncoming traffic which calmly formed a fourth and fifth lane around him.

The window was double-glazed, so I

could not hear if the honking at that specific point actually increased – probably not, it would have been deafening anyway as drivers 'talk to each other'.

They don't wave, they don't use their indicators, they never use rude hand gestures – they honk.

It becomes a comforting background sound after a while.

Our guide, Hassan was also an Egyptologist and archaeologist and with a six to one ratio our small group had the best of both worlds – able to move around quickly because there were only seven of us, and being able to speak directly with Hassan all the time.

In many temples guides had to yell to be heard by their 40 plus 'followers'; we enjoyed a one-on-one lesson in Egyptology from Hassan.

On our first crossing over the Nile in Cairo, Hassan proudly pointed to a mosque and church standing side by side on the bank of Africa's longest river.

"This," he said, "is Egypt without having to say a word. Christians and Moslems live, work and worship together without any problems or issues".

From our bus window we saw a shopkeeper vacuuming his carpets – quite normal, but in this case the carpets were on display outside his shop in rolls, and he had the vacuum cleaner in a vertical position trying to get rid of the dust of passing traffic.

All houses, even the most humble and dilapidated abode proudly feature a satellite dish on the roof; a status symbol we were told.

In a crowded place like Cairo with no garden or backyard, where do you put your chooks?

On the roof of course.

We saw some peculiar box-like constructions on the roofs of houses and sometimes on stilts, and our driver assured us they were "for the foul that give the eggs" – chooks we assumed.

And we thought they were water towers.....

We came across a donkey cart in Giza, near the pyramids. An entire shop on board – from dried figs and dates (with the appropriate scales) to cans of camel milk.

Lunch was taken at a restaurant at



This is the Egypt you do not see in glossy magazines - Cairo from our hotel window showing the endless stream of traffic, mono-coloured buildings and 'developments' on rooftops. It has a strong heartbeat!

Cairo's 625 year-old Khan El Khalili bazaar, next to a mosque by the same name.

It was a hot day and the first order from the Aussies was for a round of beer. Big frowns from our guide, the waiter and the owner.

We were on mosque ground – no alcohol.

But tobacco is OK – the waiter served our meal with a cigarette hanging out the corner of his mouth! Egypt after all is in Africa ...

To continue next week.



The magnificent Pyramid of Cheops in the back ground is one of the most recognisable landmarks in the world. It was built over a period of 20 years for Pharaoh Khufu and completed around 2560 BC. The pyramids in the foreground, clearly not built to the same standards, are for Khufu's wives.



The only evidence of an accident we came across in crazy Cairo - the driver of this car was not going to leave his bumper bar behind though - it was placed upside down on the back seat and can be seen sticking out the windows.

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