



طلاب مع مرشدهم في مسجد ابن قلاوون  
Students with Guide at Ibn Qalawn Mosque at the Citadel



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Suhaymi House

# An Academic Tour of Cairo

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**Photographs: A group of Students of University of Wales, Lampeter**

In the 1830s, in the introduction to his, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, Edward Lane, traveller, writer, and compiler of the famous *Arabic-English Lexicon*, wrote:

*Muslims of Arabian origin have for many centuries mainly composed the population of Egypt. They have changed its language, laws and general manners; and its metropolis they have made the principal seat of Arabian learning and arts. In every point of view Masr (or*

*Cairo) must be regarded as the first Arab city of our age; and the manners and customs of its inhabitants are particularly interesting, as they are a combination of those which prevail most generally in the towns of Arabia, Syria, and the whole of Northern Africa, and in a great degree in Turkey. There is no other place in which we can obtain so complete a knowledge of the most civilized classes of the Arabs. E.W. Lane. *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, 1835.➤*

From the smallest university in Britain, to the largest city in Africa. The contrast could hardly be starker - Lampeter: population approximately 2000, plus up to 1,500 students, set in the quiet greenness of West Wales; and Cairo: population 16 million, busy, noisy, never sleeping. What were we doing there?

Most of those who took part in the trip were undergraduate students, Muslim and non-Muslim, registered for a new Islamic Studies module entitled, *A Study in Islamic History and Culture - The City of Cairo*. A few were taking other modules to which the trip would be relevant, including Arabic language and Archaeology.

The aim of the module is to examine the history of a specific part of the Islamic world in more detail than a general history course would allow. Egypt and specifically Cairo were selected for a number of reasons. Egypt has a long and rich history before its conquest by the Arabs and since, as the granary for the Arabian Peninsula, the key to North Africa and to Sudan and the south, and the gateway to the Mediterranean. While other Middle Eastern and North African cities have distinctive identities



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relating to specific periods, dynasties or cultural influences, Cairo bears the imprint of the many peoples who have built and governed the city and the country. Cairo

contains the greatest concentration of Islamic monuments in the world and has been since the foundation by the Fatimids of al-Azhar, the oldest Islamic university in the world, the most important seat of Islamic learning.

The field trip was designed to give the students:

- \* An overview of the place and importance of Egypt and Cairo in the broader history of Islam in the region.

- \* A thorough knowledge of the rise and growth of the city, the stages of its development and the dynasties that have ruled it.

- \* Some understanding of the relationship between the history of the city and the nature of modern Cairene society.

Additional benefits included experience, albeit brief, of life in a Muslim country, and exposure to the Arabic language, written and spoken, all around them.

We saw so much that it would be impossible to include everything, but the following are a small selection of notes by individual students. As

can be seen, some are descriptions of particular places, whilst others are general impressions: ➔



ضريح الإمام الشافعي  
Shafi'i Mausoleum

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## Overview : Anne Watkins

The field trip was divided into approximately four parts:

1. The non-authentic Pharaonic Village gave us a good general historical background to the 'real' places we would visit during the following days.

The symbolism used in the ancient religion was fascinating and I was struck by the possibility of an early revelation of monotheism to Akhanaten. Sadly I had not stumbled on something revolutionary. The Egyptologist, Mpay Kemboly, has since directed me to numerous books both for and against this theory.

2. The small section of the old city containing some of the Coptic Christian Churches. The highlight of this area was visiting the church of San Sergius, which is built over the cave where Jesus, Mary and Joseph stayed on their Flight into Egypt. I had always imagined that this was a short sojourn. However it is estimated that Jesus lived in Egypt from the age of 2 to 6 years so he must have been considerably influenced by that culture. We also saw the relics of Saint George in the convent named after him and I liked the ornate cemetery at the Basilica.

### 3. Old Islamic Cairo

This was the real purpose of our journey. The many large mosques displayed various features relating to the date of building, current fashions and technologies, also the nationality or faith of the architect.

Particular favourites of mine were the intricate patterns on the *minbar* and the *mihrab* wall of el-Nasir Mosque; the spiral staircase consisting of 90 steps on the outside wall of the minaret at ibn Tulun Mosque; the Muhammad Ali Mosque, and the mausoleum for his family and enemies.

### 4. The Pyramids

The contrast between the dusty and polluted city on the East Bank of the Nile and the green, agricultural West Bank was stark. The minibus took us from the fertile plain to the edge of the Western (Libyan) Desert to view the three pyramids: Cheops, Kephren and Mycerinus, guarded by the Sphinx at Giza. Then to Sakkara to view the oldest (Step) pyramid. The huge and ancient stones remain in place here and the remarkable treasures of King Tutankhamun are still enjoyed in the museum in Cairo.

Other than these main attractions there were the adventures of:

Mastering the metro system,

Trying to read the signs in Arabic,

Tasting a range of delicious local dishes,

Wandering around al-Khalili Bazaar, Watching Sufis sing, dance and swirl, Seeing the sheep and goats herded on the main road in anticipation of sales for Eid ul-Adha,

and chatting with children, always eager to practise their English (learnt at school) and to have their photographs taken.

Having arrived in torrential rain and flooding we appreciated the warm, bright sun when it reappeared.

## Friday Afternoon at al-Azhar Mosque: Niki Brewer

Founded in 970 CE, al-Azhar Mosque is also home to a university (since 989 CE) which claims to be the oldest in the world. It is not named after its founder, the Fatimid Caliph, al-Mu'izz al-Din 'Allah, its name means 'the radiant' of «the flourishing». The importance of the mosque has led to many additions and restorations throughout its history, most notably the Mamluk minarets and the madressas. The large central courtyard, however, is the Fatimid original. Built to become the centre of Shi'a

Islamic teaching in Egypt, the role of the mosque and university changed with the rule of Salah al-Din, or Saladin (1171 CE), and it has always maintained a political significance. It has been the focus of Sunni orthodox Islam in Egypt ever since, with all four schools represented.

Any political significance that al-Azhar might have was somewhat lost on us as we enjoyed a most peaceful and relaxing afternoon. Sitting in the shade of the courtyard it was possible to forget the busy streets of Cairo despite still being able to hear the unremitting noise of car horns beyond the mosque walls. It provided an immense contrast to the city outside; not that the mosque was empty – anything but – with a steady stream of people going back and forth, some to pray, other meeting with friends, and students gathered around their teachers to listen. Children were playing, and several people, like us, appeared to want to make the most of the chance to relax and have a rest from the constant pressure that Cairo places upon you. Afternoon prayers brought a flurry of ➤

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مسجد الناصر حسن  
El Nasir Hassan Mosque

activity with women strolling across to pray in their own area on the right hand side, while the men walked straight across the courtyard to the main prayer area. Others chose to pray around the edge of the courtyard where they had previously been talk-

ing with friends. Meanwhile, the children carried on playing, enjoying one of the more recent renovations, sliding across the recently polished surface of the courtyard in their stockinged feet.

#### Wikalat Bazar'a: Caroline Scovell

Nick, Niki and I found the Wikalat Bazar'a by fortuitous accident as we were walking up

**This wikala is an Ottoman construction built in the Seventeenth Century by Hasan Kathkuda Abu Shanab. It covers a ground area of 1,125 sq.m and has four stories – a typically Cairene manoeuvre to gain more room for less space.**

It is apparent that al-Azhar Mosque is important for far more than its political status and as a facility for prayer. It is a public space for the people of Cairo and also for visitors like us and yet it is clearly no less sacred as a place of

prayer for opening its doors and welcoming us inside.

from al-Aqmar Mosque into the heart of Islamic Cairo. There were no signs in English outside, just a huge open door and a very large and clean open-air courtyard in view. This *wikala* is an Ottoman construction built in the Seventeenth Century by Hasan Kathkuda Abu Shanab. It covers a ground area of 1,125 sq.m and has four stories – a typically Cairene manoeuvre to gain more room for less space. When we arrived the guide was just leaving for his lunch-break (or to pray maybe – it was Friday) so we had the place more or less to ourselves. Unsure of what its exact function was we managed to work out that it was some sort of caravanserai with small rooms on the ground floor that could serve as trading or storage space. Later reading on the subject indicates that these rooms may have been used to stall pack-animals.

On the first floor the living areas become private apartments. With one or two rooms on that floor they all had stairs leading up to the higher storeys. The shape and design of each apartment varied; some were much darker than others, some had stairwells which allowed the sun to stream into the lower levels. The upper stories all had *mashrabiyya* looking out over the central courtyard and some also looked outward to other buildings. Later development had allowed construction up to the outer wall of the *wikala*, blocking off the light.

As this type of building was for utilitarian purposes there was little attempt made at decoration. The simplicity of the design that provided space, light and the opportunity to live a private life whilst having the support of being surrounded by neighbours needed nothing more.

#### Eat Until You Cry: Nick Webley

Do you follow your tour guide to the places of cultural interest when you holiday abroad, or do you follow your nose to the eating delights of your host country? When in a boisterous city such as Cairo, you would really be missing a treat if you kept yourself fed and watered at the western eateries of Macdonald's and Pizza Hut, so loved by the privileged youth of the posh suburbs.

So what is so special about Cairo food? Isn't it just kebabs and ful beans? First of all, food is fresh. From the street markets to the cafes, the



منظر عام يبين مسجد الناصر حسن والرفاعي  
View over Sultan Hassan and Rifa'i



جامع مملوك في القلعة  
Mamluk Mosque at Citadel



مسجد الناصر حسن  
El Nasir Hassan Mosque



جامع الناصر محمد بن قلاوون  
Mosque of Al Nasir Muhammad Ibn Qalaun

**The more one visits the city, the more one realizes how much there is still to discover and we plan to return on an annual basis. Each person left Cairo with his or her own individual experience, but all would agree that Cairo is a warm and welcoming place and our students were treated with kindness and courtesy. The Egyptians say that a person who drinks the water of the Nile will always return – we sincerely hope so.**

raw materials are super fresh, lettuces still moist with the morning dew, vegetables that taste of more than water, and fruits such as mango or local banana that are converted into cheap drinks. Never fail to stop at a juice stall, you can have orange, sugar cane, pomegranate, liquorice, strawberry or cherry juices all freshly made before your eyes, just the pick-me-up needed during a long walk through the Old City.

For vegetarians, there is a choice other than boiled eggs in most restaurants or food stalls. Taamiya sandwiches cost 15p - they are filled with freshly fried bean fritters (similar to the Levantine falafel), plus salad, and a pickled chilli. There are bean dishes by the dozen, hot or cold, salads, smoky aubergine and garlic dips (baba ghanoush), savoury omelettes, and cheese-filled pancakes called fatayer. It is an entertainment just to watch fatayer being made – and the taste!

In the Souq al-Attarine you can find spices which are frequently used in Arab cooking, the sweet and aromatic spices of nutmeg, cinnamon, clove, caraway, saffron

and cumin. The spice sellers stack huge hessian sacks of spices into the booths, which line the narrow streets of the souq. For a few pence you can have a quarter kilo mixture of freshly ground spices made up to your recipe or for a particular dish. As in many Arab cities the traders specialize in one product, refining their skills and gaining a reputation for quality. For fast food you can do no better than eat kosheree. A bowl will cost 25p, containing a mix of rice, pasta, brown lentils and crisp onions, all topped with a tomato sauce. For the brave, an optional garlic or fiery chilli dressing. It comes to your table in less than a minute. Some shops have such a reputation for the quality of their kebabs, kosheree, pancakes, or mince meat filled pasties that Cairenes travel miles to eat the best.

When the stomach is crying for mercy, the next best thing to sleeping it off is a visit to the teashop. Again, what a choice. Arab tea, Lipton for the tourist, qahwa, mint tea, milky Nescafé, sahlab, all to accompany a nice long cool smoke on the shisha. The scent of charcoal and apple

flavoured tobacco is one of those olfactory memories that will always take you back to a Middle Eastern café, watching the world go by, hearing the call to prayer erupt from the nearest mosque to be repeated across the district.

#### A Final Note

We spent a week in Cairo and although we were busy every day we saw only a fraction of Cairo's rich and varied heritage. We could have spent a week just exploring the numerous Mamluk mosques in the area of Bab al-Wazir, perhaps the most beautiful and tranquil of which is the Aqsunqur «Blue Mosque», named for its radiant blue Ottoman tilework. The more one visits the city, the more one realizes how much there is still to discover and we plan to return on an annual basis. Each person left Cairo with his or her own individual experience, but all would agree that Cairo is a warm and welcoming place and our students were treated with kindness and courtesy. The Egyptians say that a person who drinks the water of the Nile will always return – we sincerely hope so. ■