

## The boutique hotel reaches Cairo

On the Nile's eastern bank, the Villa Belle Epoque is a stylish bolt hole away from the city's frenetic hubbub. Teresa Machan of the Observer checks in



The tranquil pool area at Villa Belle Epoque, in Cairo's Maadi suburb.  
Photograph: Teresa Machan

'A tree walk in Cairo? What's wrong with doing the pyramids like everyone else?' My friend has a point, but I can't convey my answer by text. Instead I switch off the phone and inhale the scents of honeysuckle, mimosa and jasmine that have breezed in on the cool morning air. Butterflies flit in buxom, blue-blossomed jacarandas and hollyhocks and bird-of-paradise plants stand to attention like sweeping brushes. There's sunshine and birdsong - hoopoes, European bee-eaters, a laughing dove, and the reedy squawk of two ring-necked parakeets kicking off by the pool. It's a fair trade-off for the fumes, bleating horns and rush-hour mayhem of downtown Cairo.

It may sound trite, but what if you've seen the pyramids - twice? I'm done haggling at Khan el-Khalili and I've had my fill of the Egyptian museum, at least until it moves to its sparkly new home in Giza next year. But I refuse to ditch old-flame Cairo for the next low-cost fling because the glitter has fallen from her icons. I just need a new plan of attack. And here, in a garden villa in the lushly landscaped quarter of Maadi, I think I've found it.

The restored 1920s Villa Belle Epoque has plenty of Cairo's exotic allure yet none of its irritants which, although arguably part of its appeal, can get wearing after a hard day's street pounding. This is one of those owner-run gems where you can squander precious sightseeing hours without feeling at all guilty.

Why would I want to be haggling with a trinket-toting bandit in front of Cheops or risking life and limb on the Giza ring road when I can be pottering in the local bazaar and relaxing under a peach tree? Besides, Egypt is omnipresent - in the 13 rooms embellished with handpicked antiques, in details throughout such as the shutters, cornices and Arabic motifs.

There's a tranquil, luminous air to Villa Belle Epoque. A ground-floor conservatory fronts on to the garden, its patios and poolside dining area shaded by fig, guava and peach trees. Some rooms (such as Cairo, which has a palm tree and a plump-cushioned sofa from which to watch the sunset) have plant-filled conservatories for lounging in. Others have French windows giving on to large balconies. From mine, Rosetta, you can harvest the pendulous fruit from a mango tree. Tea at a Nile-side plant nursery, winter bonfires, trips to the Opera House and walking tours of Maadi's historic homes and gardens can also be arranged.

A former stomping ground of Anglo-Egyptians, this tree-lined neighbourhood bears all the hallmarks of the British abroad. Founded in 1907 on the Nile's eastern bank (Maadi means ferryboat) by Jewish-British investment company Delta Land, the suburb was settled by wealthy expats, who filled their sprawling gardens with exotic plants and trees. Boundaries were marked by hedges and casuarina trees, there was an annual gardening competition, and once a week lawns were flooded with their quota of fresh Nile water. Villas, churches, mosques, a sporting club and a clutch of municipal buildings hint at Maadi's colonial heyday, and although some of the more handsome villas have now been snaffled by embassies and are watched by rifle-toting guards, Maadi remains home to a dynamic international community.

And an awful lot of trees. According to my guide, a local Egyptologist called Willy, some have been around for millennia. When times were hard, local softwoods were used to make the Pharaohs' coffins. "Coated in mud, fine plaster and varnish they gave the appearance of gold." The ancient mulberry fig, mentioned in the Bible, also grows here.

We amble, unmolested, down Maadi's main thoroughfare, Road 9. Lively enough and with a scattering of coffee shops, bakeries, bookshops and open-fronted workshops, it's positively comatose compared with the chaos of downtown Cairo. I meet a jolly ironing man, whose industrial-sized board fronts the street, buy a book on Maadi and stop outside a fruit shop, called The Tree, which has one literally growing through its roof.

"In Maadi you can't chop them down," says the owner, Hany. "It was either buy it with the tree or don't buy it at all." He slices open a fruit that looks like a peach but tastes like a plum, hands it to me and declares proudly that he supplies herbs to Wagamama, which opened its first North African branch, in Cairo, last year. There's no charge for the peach-plum.

I idle away the next hour at Cafe 55, which boasts five happy hours. "That's why Egyptians are so happy," grins the manager.

En route to the toilets I find a back room hung with historic black and white photographs. There's Maadi Sporting Club's Nymphaeas Pond, and its 1952 tennis team, the 1953 Lycée Français, now a mosque, and a submerged Canal Road pictured in the flash flood of 1945.

Back at Belle Epoque I plonk myself on a shaded terrace and order lunch. Last night Ashraf, my kindly waiter, had recommended a steaming pot of Nubian-style lamb stew, chock-full of velvety meat and garden-fresh okra; today it's a zingy cold orange soup. His grandfather, a tailor for the Egyptian army, settled in Maadi in 1899. Having worked the Nile cruise circuit since 1991, Ashraf is happy to be home. I'm too full for dessert but a plate of tiny tooth-rotting pastries arrives, on the house.

That evening I ride the metro 15 minutes into town, for the princely sum of one Egyptian pound (11p), to see some Sufi dancing. Not one for folklore, I'm dubious, but when I find out it's held inside a restored caravanserai - a spectacular building in the Fatimid quarter of Old Cairo, I decide to give it the benefit of the doubt.

Admission is free, which is a travesty, because Brucie would have a field day with this lot. Handsome, agile and supremely talented, the performers peel off layer upon layer of multi-coloured petticoats, whirling kilos of material around as if it were spun sugar. It's like watching a Cirque du Soleil performance crossed with a Robbie Williams concert, and I want to shower them with baksheesh.

Skirting Khan el-Khalili with its pashminas (got the rainbow-assorted set), hookahs (two up in the loft) and leather bags (always room for another) I make a beeline instead for a taxi rank and scoot back to Maadi, where I sip mint tea under a stately mango tree at the vanilla villa. Cats mew, bats clatter in the leaves and families in the neighbouring apartment chitchat and clatter plates.

Back in Rosetta I fling open the windows and balcony doors. Something strange is occurring. After a day "out there" I want to let Cairo in, not shut it out. I never thought I'd say it, but thank God for the 'burbs.

Theresa Machan

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