

# Cairo Alphabetically

## – as experienced by Outi, Anne and Anu

In November 2004, **Outi Boman**, **Anne Dubbelman** and I popped in for a visit in an unusually warm Cairo. A week in a pulsing metropolis like Cairo is an entirely too short a time for all the necessities, such as dance lessons, seeing friends, shopping and sight-seeing and we left the city with a certain sadness but already thinking about the next trip. Here are some highlights of this one!

### Actor's Club

Invited by our dancer friends, we spend an evening at the Actor's Union Club on the Nile. The evening is cool and I'm happy I'm wearing a cardigan.

Earlier, I saw kingfishers diving in the water. Now, in the evening, it seems to me that the flying mosquitoes are joined in the air by bats. The locusts are gone now, as the swarming is over: there is a dead red, ten-centimetre long locust lying on the club floor. After seeing it, it is easy to understand the plague they could be during Biblical times. A creature that size could undoubtedly consume huge amounts of vegetation in a moment.

The evening passes in pleasant conversation and solving riddles: how do you manage to carry across the river a cabbage, a sheep and a wolf without any of them getting eaten by another? In addition to yourself, the boat will only hold to others at a time...

### Buses

An interesting phenomenon in the traffic culture is the concept of *full*. The bus is full only when some of the passengers are hanging dangerously on the outside. Another difference is the attitude towards smoking: go on and smoke if you feel like it. And when you've finished you can always grind the rest of the cigarette against the bus floor.

## Cats

They are everywhere and they come in all sizes and colours: large, small, spotted, dirty... Rats, on the other hand seem to be missing and the Cairene fondness for the cats is easy to understand.

## Dina

We are enjoying an evening out at the Night Club of the Semiramis. When first entering the hotel, we see a *zaffa* which includes, e.g. six young bridesmaids dressed in white ballet *tutus*. There is an orchestra with four dancers wearing *shamadans* welcoming the bridal procession. We watch until the procession enters their actual wedding venue.

We continue to the Night Club. By sheer chance, I happen to be seated in exactly the same table as on my previous visit to Cairo. Visibility to the stage is good and after an excellent show by **Ehab Tawfik**, the dance star of the evening enters. As the show starts after half past three in the morning I find it a little difficult to stay alert toward the end of the glorious show.

This time we get to see four different costumes on **Dina** with extremely swift changes (of course, we can only judge the latter by the time the star is absent from the limelight). All the costumes reach down to Dina's ankles which for her seems unusual, and they are also – for her - exceptionally covering. Her recent brief absence from the stage does not seem to have had any adverse effects on her dancing and she is magnificent.

The next day at the bazaar I buy a Dina DVD – that is I think I buy one: of the four discs within only one contains about 30 minutes of actual dancing by Dina...

## Finery

We visit the studio of **Eman Zaki**, the costume designer. I only intend to browse, but... We end up buying two costumes each and my conscience is bothering me a little as the costumes are not exactly cheap. Luckily, I haven't the heart to scold myself for very long and during the next visit, for fitting, I keep happily staring in the mirror admiring the colours. I'm eagerly waiting for the final result...

## **'Id**

Ramadan is over, there is a general holiday atmosphere. Everybody is wearing new clothes and there are tinsel and coloured lights everywhere, even in the taxis.

This year, the summer has been lingering unusually long and at the beginning of our Cairo-week, the temperatures are near 30°C. As everybody was expecting the winter to come on time, the new clothes are warm winter garments. So now they are sweating in the warm weather...

If you are a passionate shopper, 'Id is not the time for a visit as almost all the boutiques and shops are closed. In Khan el-Khalili, only the shops selling tourist articles are open. If, however, you want to learn about the Egyptian culture and society, your timing is spot on as you have the opportunity to see some unusual things.

## **Hosseney**

We have an opportunity to take workshops with **Mohamed el Hosseney**. In Finland, we are expecting him in Helsinki, where he is shortly to visit Studio Shamsina, so it is nice to get a jumpstart on his style.

Hosseney is an efficient teacher full of eager energy and at times I feel that my head is unable to absorb all the information our teacher is ready to give. Heroically, we try and Hosseney seems to be reasonably happy with the result. We train Simsimiyya, Saidi, some ballet technique and some men's steps.

It will be really nice to meet Hosseney and his wife Doaa again in the spring and I'm eagerly looking forward to the workshops and show!

## **Mahmoud Reda Studio**

We go to the studio to say hello. **Mahmoud Reda** himself is not there but we are shown around by **Farouk Mustafa**. Since the Masrah Dance Company's last visit, some fans have found their way in...

On the walls, there are beautiful photos by Mahmoud Reda and costume designs drawn by **Farida Fahmy**.

## **Noise**

A cock is crowing at four in the morning, sounding a bit painful. His friend answers him in equal measure. After a while, the first prayer-call is heard. At half past six, a maniacal laughter echoes in the walls: the laughter proves to be a representative of a local dove species, *Streptopelia senegalensis*, the Laughing Dove. Fortunately, you can get used to almost everything and by the end of the week we are no longer disturbed his chuckling.

## **Pharmacy**

You may have some stomach trouble: Antinal will help being an essential part of your travelling first-aid kit.

## **Reda Troupe**

We are lucky to be able to see a Reda Troupe performance at the Balloon Theatre. The space is huge, so is the stage. Between the audience and the stage there is the orchestra pit.

Both acts begin with a voice reading out the programme followed by the entrance of the conductor who then takes a bow and the musicians start to play. At times, the conductor will rather aggressively wave his arm to silence a section of the orchestra, as if to say 'shut up!' The volume is high and I'm amazed that there are two very small babies among the otherwise sparse crowd. The cacophony is added to by the audience continuing their every-day actions despite being in a theatre: right beside us a lady is loudly speaking on the phone while the dance performances are going on.

It is easy to pick out Hosseney, Doaa and our friends from their last year's Helsinki trip **Kazafy, Ragai, Ashraf** and **Faramawi** on the stage. **Hassan** is sick and Hosseney is dancing one of Hassan's dances. Our palms are glowing red-hot after the show.

## **Simsimiyya**

We make a new acquaintance: the Simsimiyya dance. We learn a relatively fast choreography by Hosseney, which to my mind contains quite a lot of Charleston-like steps: twisting the feet in and out, lifting them high and jumping quite a bit. Even though the memory gets a lot of exercise, this is also great fun. This style is very interesting and definitely quite something extra!

We also play the spoons by touching them to various places on the body. Again, we get to pick up our feet and, at times, it is difficult to remember which side of the ankle the cutlery are actually supposed to be making contact with. We are doing well at a slow tempo, but what will happen when we try this a little faster?

## **Traffic**

Hair-raising, as always. They drive you on a one-way street against the indicated direction – and lo – there is another car coming directly at you!

The speed on an empty stretch of a road rises easily to at least 80km/h (also on a scooter!) whereas the rush-hour traffic barely moves at a snail's pace. The horns are continuously sounding, whether by necessity or just for the fun of it.

The taxi driver smokes like a chimney, never mind if when lighting the cigarette he lets completely go of the wheel. A car will fit in a surprisingly small space in the traffic and a three-lane street will comfortably fit at least five cars abreast.

## **Using the telephone**

We need to make a reservation at a Night Club and it is too expensive to use our own mobile phones. Mission: find a phone box, buy a phone card and phone! We find a pharmacy selling phone cards. We find a phone box. We find the correct phone number.

The phone is working and despite the street noise I can actually hear what the person at the other end of the line is saying. The problems begin when we are supposed to give a local phone number as a security measure: the official will not choose to believe that we are not staying in the hotel where the Night Club is situated and that we do not have a

local phone number. At the end, we manage to convince him to make the reservation and we can happily look forward to the evening.

## **Water**

There is running water at the place where we are staying but the liquid flowing through the pipes is cold. As the beginning of the week is warm, this is no problem but after the winter finally arrives toward the end of the week we start to shiver after a shower. Running hot water is one of the things that you tend to take for granted but which travelling can prove to be a true luxury.

## **Your friends**

Our Cairene friends look after us magnificently and make our visit extremely rewarding and memorable. Warm thanks to them: we have many lovely memories and we are waiting to see them again!

## **Photos**

Anu, Doaa, Rashid's niece, Rashid, Hossey and Shams.

The author freezing in the Night Club.

At the metro station: Anne Kolehmainen, Anne Dubbelman and Outi Boman.

A genuine Egyptian cat.

Anne at Eman Zaki studio fitting a costume.

The original Finnish article was published in Ishtar Magazine 1/2005 ([www.ishtar.fi](http://www.ishtar.fi)). This article has been modified by the author to accommodate the English speaking reader.