

CULTURE SPLASH

Clockwise from here: the Sphinx; Enrique Cansino, Eleonore Kamir and Memdouh Khalif of Nour el Nil; a Nour el Nil *dahabiya*; pudding at Tianma, St Regis Cairo. Far right: Al-Rifai Mosque



DEEP DIVE



Cairo

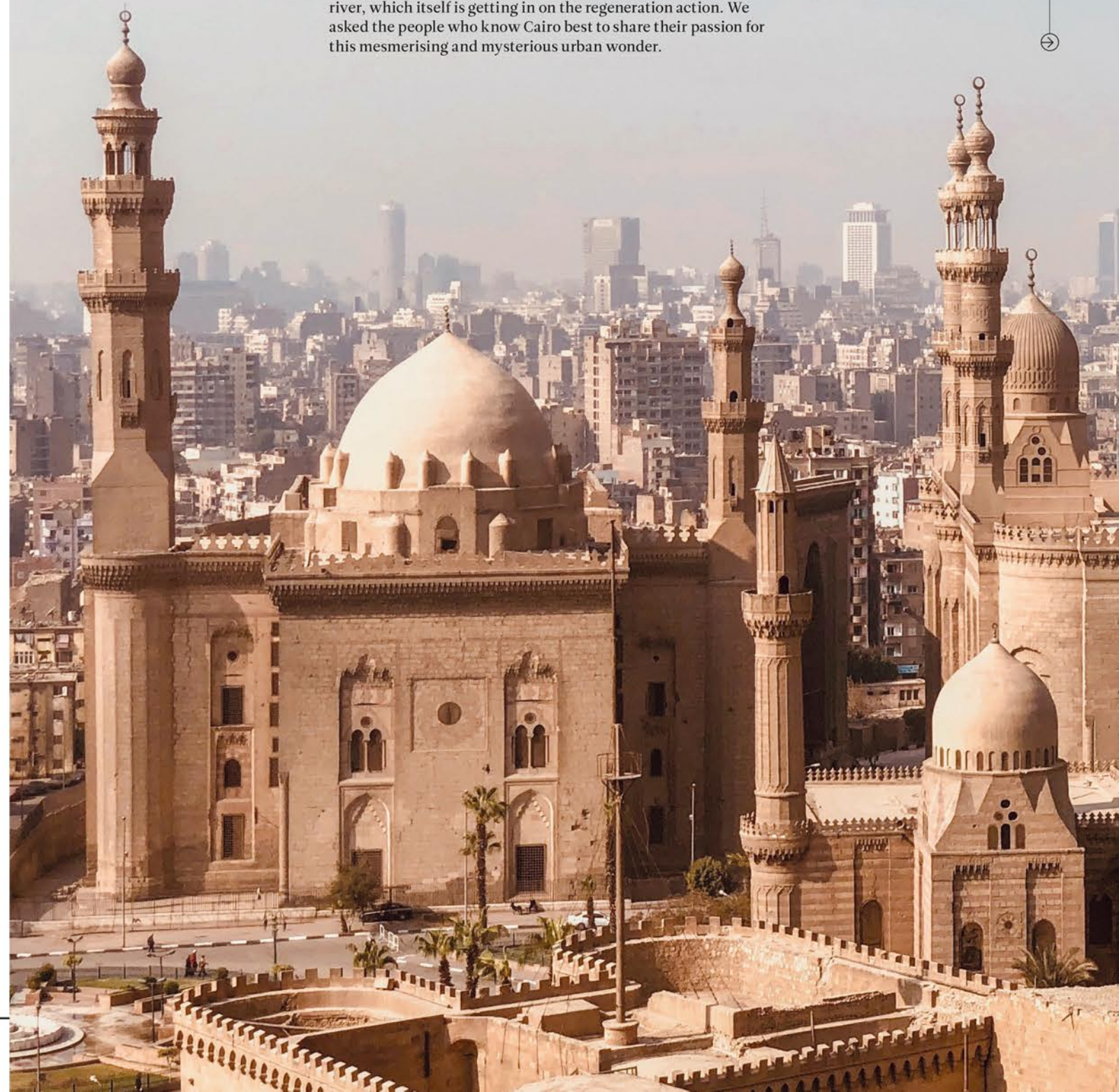
Egypt has been the go-to destination of intrepid travellers for centuries. Now, with the long-awaited opening of the world's largest archaeological museum and the arrival of mega-luxe hotel brands, there's even more reason to take a walk on the Nile side. Luke Abrahams meets some of the capital's biggest fans



Photographs: Omar El-Sharawy; Dylan Chandler; Muhammed Mortada; Emil Diephuis

From the Great Pyramids of Giza to the buzzing metropolis of the capital and the glittering, storied shores of the Nile, this desert land exceeds epic by every measure. Raw and sprawling Cairo, like most of the world's great cities, is where a dizzying mash-up of cultures collide, through bold art, foodie delicacies, punk girl bands rocking it up downtown, pop-up museums celebrating ancient and contemporary Islamic art and, of course, the mighty Nile and those famous pyramids and temples.

Now there's the new (meets old) kid on the block. After years of delays, The Grand Egyptian Museum is set to open its doors later this year. What else is new? A hotel scene that exploded before and over the course of the pandemic. The biggest arrival is the St Regis in a stellar spot overlooking the crimson magic of the river, which itself is getting in on the regeneration action. We asked the people who know Cairo best to share their passion for this mesmerising and mysterious urban wonder.



THE HOTEL GENERAL MANAGER

A proud local and the GM of the brand-spanning-new St Regis hotel in Cairo, Magdy Anis knows how and what makes the perfect luxurious stay. His take on it? This hotel does not just set a “new benchmark for luxury in Cairo, but in the whole of Egypt.”

The St Regis Cairo pays homage to the hundreds of craftspeople who dedicated their time and handiwork to perfecting a distinctly modern vision of Egypt. We want to offer our guests curated experiences that broaden the mind, unwind the spirit, shift perspectives and empower authentic moments of connection. Our spot, near all the central happenings in Cairo, inspires guests to revel in the cultural location of the hotel while enjoying our stellar service, from around-the-clock customised experiences to the handy digital-forward ebutler service.

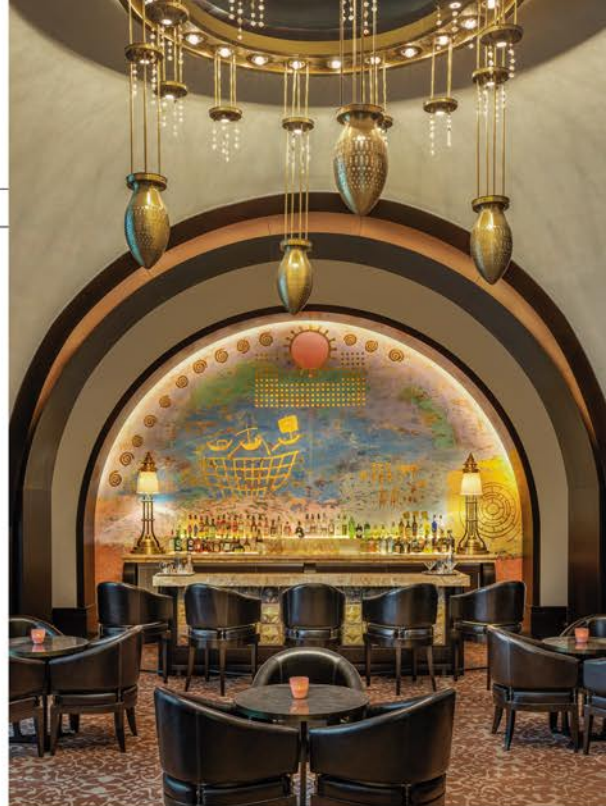
The hotel’s design connects the heritage of the brand with the authentic and rich Arabic culture of the locale. Michael Graves, the celebrated designer, is the man behind it, and the result is a standout landmark and cultural expo on the banks of the River Nile.

With our prime location in mind, we encourage our guests to seek out the very best of what our city has to offer. For local Egyptian street food, El Prince is a must and is popular among Egyptians and tourists. For casual dining that offers traditional authentic Egyptian dishes, head to Abou El Sid. And for breakfast with a view of the pyramids, there’s no better place than the 9 Pyramids Lounge. As for the one thing you really don’t want to miss, I’d have to suggest going on a *felucca* at sunset. You can jump on one from the newly opened Mamsha Ahl Misr, Egypt’s first modern walkway overlooking the beautiful Nile.

marriott.co.uk

SHINING LIGHT

A pink sun mural graces the St Regis Bar. Below: the Sirocco poolside restaurant and bar at St Regis has Nile views



Photograph: Ralf Tooten

SALE OF THE CENTURY

A Noor El Nil *dahabiya*.
Below: Enrique Cansino,
Eleonore Kamir and
Memdouh Khalifa



THE ECO-CRUISE OPERATOR

Owners of luxury Nile cruise company Nour El Nil, Enrique Cansino, Eleonore Kamir and Memdouh Khalifa reintroduced dahabiyas to the famed river almost two decades ago. Since then, the trio is credited with making the cruise industry in Egypt greener and, as a result, many companies have followed their lead. But their business is more than just a hyped-up cruise along an iconic route, it's "about giving back and exploring the best of what Egypt has to offer from the people who know it best: the Egyptians you scarcely meet," says company general manager Miguel Cansino.

Nour El Nil brought the *dahabiya* back to the Nile 20 years ago. For those that don't know, this type of sailboat was used in ancient Egyptian times and was revived during the early 19th century by luxury high-end travellers in search of something different while cruising the Nile. People often ask why they should choose us over all the other big Nile cruisers and our answer is simple: we are all about protecting the locals and our environment.

We employ roughly 100 Egyptians and, unlike large cruise boats and other companies, we hire our staff year round – even during the pandemic to ensure they and their families were kept well fed and housed. To protect our home, we use wind power whenever the weather permits to minimise the use of gas and coal on our routes. We don't like waste, and we are very conscious of the potential impact our boats might have on the environment.

Our cruises are also focused on getting people in touch with the 'real' Egypt. This means sourcing all our food locally. And when we say locally, we mean literally buying fish from the fishermen who pass by on the river. The same goes for the vegetables we use. We also take people to villages as we sail so they can interact with the locals, from soccer-obsessed kids to our women bakers and more.

My aunt Eleonore also works very closely with local women, bringing their handmade creations, from clothes to jewellery and accessories, to our on-board boutiques. It's allowed us to show off their talents and celebrate an Egypt beyond the labels while highlighting how talented the women of our country are.

At every pit stop and sunset, we want everyone who comes on our cruises to see how Egyptians truly live and work to get a better understanding and appreciation of what Egypt is and what it means to be Egyptian.

nourelnil.com



THE RADICAL AUTHOR

Nadia Wassef opened Egypt's first modern bookstore, Diwan, with her sister Hind back in 2002. A self-confessed bibliophile, the widely celebrated author of Chronicles of a Cairo Bookseller knows all about the city's culture scene.

Cairo is one of the most exotic cities in the world where 7,000 years of history co-exist. I write in my book: "In Cairo's streets, the present never fully overthrows the past, nor do the two coalesce. Like bickering neighbours, they delight in existing side by side in joint discord." There's a lively alternative cultural scene in Cairo and lots more to explore beyond the mainstream of museums, mosques and pyramids. The recent contemporary arts and cultural scene is particularly exciting. A highlight is the Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival (D-CAF). It incorporates different spaces, from rooftops to historic buildings, and puts up installations highlighting local, regional and international artists. It's all about celebrating cutting-edge music, theatre, dance and the visual arts. Also check out Room Art Space. It offers everything from theatre to performing arts, book readings and open-mic sets. It's in 10 Tolombat Street in Garden City, a Belle Époque building that was the British Army HQ during World War II and was known as 'Number 10'. On the music front, there's a fantastic group called Tablet El-Sitt – Egyptian women singers and percussionists who play the tambourine, drums and finger cymbals. Their performances revive traditional folk songs for modern audiences. As a bibliophile, Suur Ezbakiya book market will always own a big piece of my heart. It's home to 100-plus stalls of secondhand books, newspapers, magazines and first editions... the kind of books you want to pick up and smell. There lies the alternative history of the world. Also in downtown Cairo is another favourite: L'Orientaliste, an antiquarian bookshop, home to unique tomes, vintage postcards and lithographs. You literally walk through one chapter of Egypt's history. Not too far away is the timeless Lehnert & Landrock—more museum than bookshop—which was established in the 1920s and offers items with an Egyptian and North African flavour.

Chronicles of a Cairo Bookseller (Coursair) is out now



SOUND AND VISION
Browsing Cairo's historic Ezbakiya book market.
Below: a performer at Room Art Space



Photograph: Alamy

Must visit



The Grand Egyptian Museum

Say hello to the world's largest archaeological house of antiquities.

Plagued by construction delays, it's finally set to open its glassy doors later this year with about 95.5 per cent of the major works now complete. The entire complex is built on one giant slope on the Giza plateau and is just outside of central Cairo. Surrounded by sculpture gardens in the museum park, a gargantuan statue of Ramses II (below) awaits your arrival in the main atrium before a rather grand staircase takes you up to valley level, where precisely 87 statues of various kings and gods line the hill.

The main galleries are divided into four eras: pre-dynastic (up to 3100 BC) and Old Kingdom (the pyramid builders), Middle Kingdom, New Kingdom (Tutankhamun, Ramses and so on) and Greco-Roman. Everything is then arranged thematically, from religion to kingship, power and society. The major draw is the Tutankhamun galleries where, for the first time in history, everything excavated from the famed king's final resting place (once in the Valley of the Kings) will be put on display in the order that Howard Carter came across them in his tomb.

grandegyptianmuseum.org



GETTING THERE

British Airways flies direct daily to Cairo from London Heathrow.

Flight time: around five hours

ba.com/cairo