



WELCOME TO CAIRO

AFTER BEING invited on a sponsored political trip to Israel for the 36th World Zionist Congress, it only made sense to make my way over to Cairo, from Tel Aviv, with visions of veiled dancers floating through my head.

I arrive in Cairo in the midst of a heat wave. It's so hot that opening the taxi window is far more effective than the hair dryer in my two-bit hotel and so hot that my sunglasses' lenses crack because the plastic frames are melting.

This trip is a delayed pilgrimage to the home of my academic forefathers. I completed my undergrad degree in ancient Middle Eastern history. This place is real and the pyramids do exist.

While walking through Khan al-Khalili, the hectic Cairo tourist trap of a market, shopkeepers tug at my arm, smack my hand and wave to get my attention.

There is also a Cairo nightlife scene, but most people prefer to hang out at street-level patios smoking shisha and drinking tea, coffee or pure fruit-pulp smoothies.

Directions for smoking shisha are to suck; spit or wipe your mouth if ash comes through the tube; exhale via nose—and savor and enjoy the mellow buzz that follows. Shisha is made from tobacco and molasses, and comes in a variety of flavors. "But the trend right now is to produce tobacco with thick smoke and rich fruity flavor," says Ahmed el-Ibiary, great-grandson of Saleh Mohamed el-Ibiary, founder of Nakhla Tobacco.

A typical stay in Luxor, nine hours south, includes visits to the austere Karnak temple, and pharaonic crypts in the Valleys of the Kings and Queens, but for me, it meant a hunt for raks sharky, better known as belly dancing. I'm directed to the St. Catherine, a spot on the other side of town. I find safe passage thanks to a local teenager, who tries to sell me hash (plentiful in town).

A plump young lady in a red sequined princess suit with a flesh-tone girdle prances around a small stage equipped with a small band. The music stops, and a hulking old man in a fez barks in Arabic over the mic. The foreign (to me) tongue combined with the reverb and smoky seating have me thinking I'm at the Mos Eisley Cantina on Tatooine, but the show is just heating up.

A man in a turban gets on stage and dances gleefully around the busy harlot who shows a bit of leg and flashes him a sultry wink. A stagehand throws money over his head while he circles in an ecstatic trance. The ritual is as intimate as they come, but oddly, nobody seems to mind my constant photo-snapping and video-taking. Leaving me with more just memories. My trip comes to a nearly safe close, but I'm caught completely off-guard by a porter at the airport. I'm late and frantic. He offers to help me cut the line for a fee; I shell out on instinct. But when I arrive at the check-in and see that there is no line at all, I am deceived. Touché, Cairo.

JESSE SHIP

