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Cairo: More Than Pyramids

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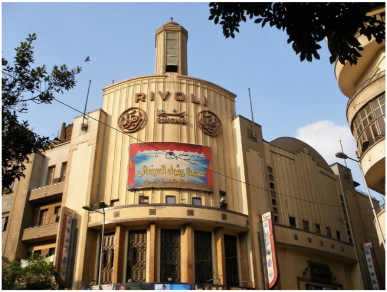
When thinking of Cairo, certain sights come immediately to mind: the Pyramids, the Sphinx, the Egyptian Museum. They're all wonderful, but Cairo has much more to offer. Over the course of its long history the city has been ruled by Romans, Fatimids, Mamluks, Ottomans, British and more. Each of these cultures has left its mark. A day of walking downtown will take you past Coptic Christian churches, medieval mosques straight out of *Arabian Nights*, Khedivial boulevards that look like Belle Époque Paris, and art deco cinemas that seem transplanted from Miami Beach. Cairo is an endlessly fascinating city, with surprises around every corner. Join me for a stroll through some its most interesting religious, colonial and culinary spots.



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Rivoli Cinema

26 July St, Oraby, Al Azbakeyah, Cairo Governorate, Egypt

The Rivoli Cinema (1946, architect Leonard Allen) has one of my favorite art deco exteriors in Cairo. Its vertical lines draw the eye upwards to a futuristic finial, and the façade blends harmoniously with the streamlined curves of the neighboring Hotel Carlton (1935). Its interior is another story. The grand 2,150 seat auditorium has been divided into eight screens and the famous Compton pipe organ (first in the Middle East) is long gone. Currently, the theater is closed for renovations.

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Oraby Square

Oraby, Al Azbakeyah, Cairo Governorate, Egypt

Oraby Square is named for Ahmad Ourabi, who was part of the 1879 revolt against the administration of Khedive Tewfik. He later helped to reform the Egyptian military and government. The square is surrounded by shops, banks and restaurants, including the excellent Hawawshi and El Falero Sweets. Pedestrian-only Mohammed Bek Al Alfy Street is also here. Al Alfy has recently undergone a thorough refurbishment, with new trees, streetlamps and a granite sidewalk. All the inviting little cafes received a fresh coat of paint, too. Very pleasant to get out of the traffic and stroll around Oraby Square and Al Alfy.

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Alfi Bey

3 El-Alfi Street, Cairo Egypt

Alfi Bey has been serving up fine Egyptian cuisine in Cairo's old theater district near Oraby Square since 1938. The decor is elegant (marble floors, white tablecloths) and the food doesn't disappoint. I've had the mutton and stuffed pigeon and enjoyed both. Not a lot of meat on pigeons, but you get two, with plenty of stuffing. Classic kofta and kebabs are available, along with ribs and other grilled meats. It's a Muslim restaurant, so no booze. Great tea, though!

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Windsor Hotel Cairo

19 Alfi Bey Street, Cairo, Egypt

Staying at the Windsor (a former British Officer's Club), it's easy to imagine that the 1952 Egyptian Revolution never took place. English accents ring out in the clubby Barrel Bar as aged gents in old school ties peruse newspapers on reading sticks. Everything here is as it was before the Windsor's famous sister hotel, Shepheard's, burned to the ground across the street. The manned elevator, the telephones, the switchboard, the furniture...all original. The staff, especially Samir Fayek, will treat you like family.

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Diana Cinema

El-Darb El-Ahmar, Cairo Governorate, Egypt

The Diana Cinema, formerly known as the Diana Palace, is one of the bestpreserved art deco theaters in downtown Cairo. It was built in 1930 and the interior still retains its original layout. Most surviving golden age movie auditoriums have been split up into multiple screens, but the Diana remains a single-screen (with seating for 1500!), just as its Italian architects intended. The foyer, with its double staircase, is equally impressive. Films here are almost always Egyptian.

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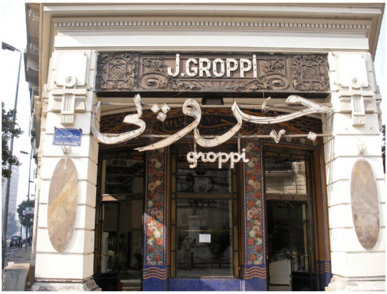

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Groppi

Talaat Harb Square | Down Town, Cairo, Egypt

Cafe Groppi, opened in 1909, is a landmark on the corner of Talaat Harb and Qasr Al-Nil Streets. High Society, movie stars, royalty, politicians, military big shots... everyone went to Groppi. The elegant Art Nouveau building, with mosaics by Antonio Castaman, would be perfectly at home on any boulevard in Paris. Its founder, Swiss chocolatier Giacomo Groppi, was a purveyor of confections to Royal families all over the Middle East. The cafe is currently undergoing renovations by Alchemy Design Studios.

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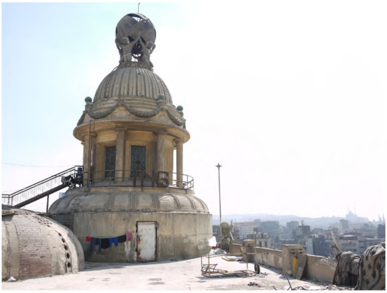

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Tiring Historic Building

Ghayt Al Adah, Abdeen, Cairo Governorate, Egypt

This striking colonial building was once Cairo's finest luxury department store. It was built by Austrian merchant Victor Tiring in 1910, but, due to post World War I British occupation, only remained in business for around a decade. The building was designed by Czech architect Oscar Horowitz, and its rooftop globe, supported by four Atlas figures, is an icon of Cairo. Today it houses small stores, workshops and squatters. The decaying interior still retains hints of its past grandeur.

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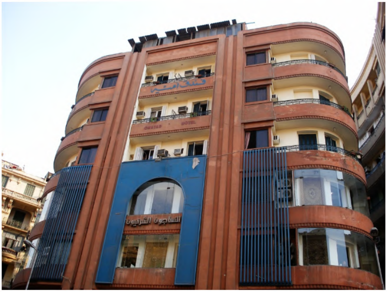

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Omayad Hotel

22, 26 July Th St., Cairo, Egypt

Architecturally speaking, the Omayad Hotel is great: colonial art deco with streamlined curves. It's also fairly well-preserved compared to other deco buildings in the neighborhood. As a place to stay, it leaves a bit to be desired. Basic accommodations with AC and a tiny TV. The area is noisy, but in the heart of the action. There's a decent coffee shop on the ground floor of the hotel. If you're on a budget, the Omayad is a good choice.

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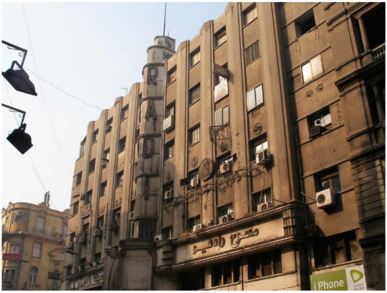

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Cinema Radio

Haret Al Bosti, Marouf, Qasr an Nile, Cairo Governorate, Egypt

The art deco Radio Cinema, designed by French architect Max Edrai in 1948, has an eye-catching frontage on Talaat Harb Street, with a large neon sign set into an office building. To get to the theater, go through the passage of retail shops into the courtyard. The auditorium is dead ahead. The Radio, which sat idle for many years, was recently renovated by the Al-Ismaelia Investment Company and reopened to much acclaim. Though movies are no longer shown, the popular puppet TV show Abla Fajita is filmed here with a live audience.

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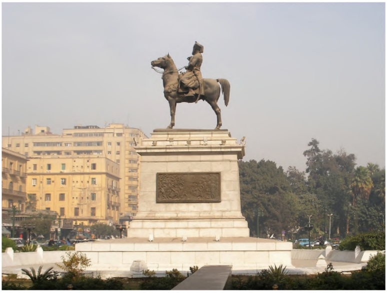

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Opera Square

Giza Governorate, Egypt

From 1869 to 1971 this square was home to the Khedivial Opera House, built by Khedive Ismail to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal. Its design was based on Milan's La Scala, and Verdi's Egyptian opera, Aida, premiered there in 1871. A century later, the famed opera house burned to the ground. Opera Square is still home to a great statue, however. Ibrahim Pasha, father of Ismail, sits astride his horse, atop an enormous pedestal. This landmark sculpture by Charles Henri Joseph Cordier was completed in 1872.

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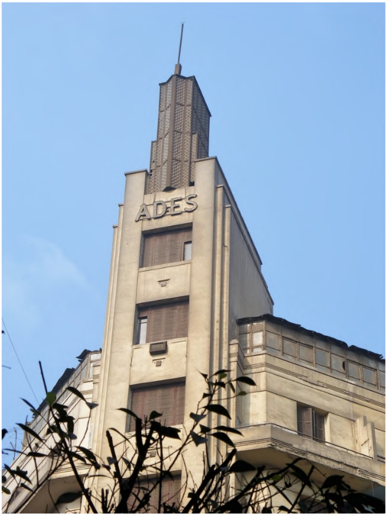

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Ades Building

Oraby, Al Azbakeyah, Cairo Governorate, Egypt

This distinctive art deco building (look at that finial!) on Mohammed Farid Street downtown used to be a luxurious department store. It was part of a chain owned by the Jewish Ades family from Aleppo, Syria. The store was damaged in 1948 during a series of bombings that targeted Jewish neighborhoods and businesses. Like many other Jewish-owned properties it was confiscated by Nasser's government after Israel's failed invasion of Egypt (the Suez Crisis) in 1956.

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Metro Cinema

26 يوليو، Bab Al Louq, Abdin, Cairo Governorate, Egypt

The art deco Metro Cinema, designed by New York architect Thomas Lamb, opened in downtown Cairo in 1940. It was a Loew's theater and showcased MGM pictures. The Metro, known as "The Pride of the Orient" was popular then (first in Egypt to have AC), and remains so now. It's fantastic to see this classic picture palace at night with crowds flowing in and the red neon all aglow. If you go, expect to watch Egyptian features or Hollywood blockbusters.

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Religion Compound

Mari Girgis Street, Old Cairo, Cairo, Egypt, 11728

Though Egypt is a Muslim nation, other religions have played important roles in its history and continue to do so today. The Religion Compound is a preservation district that showcases Coptic Christian churches, Muslim mosques and a Jewish synagogue (Ben Ezra). The Egyptian Antiquities Authority put a lot of money into re-cobbling the picturesque streets and restoring places of worship. You can also see the remains of the old Roman fort (Babylon Fortress) that once stood here. Don't miss the famous Coptic Hanging Church of Babylon, one of Egypt's oldest churches.

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Ben Ezra Synagogue

Cairo, Egypt

Only a handful of Jews remain in Egypt today, but this synagogue in Coptic Cairo is a reminder of their once flourishing presence. A Jewish congregation purchased the building from the Copts in 882, then transformed it into a synagogue. The current version of the synagogue dates to 1892 and is decorated with Ottoman-style floral patterns-- very unusual in synagogues. The building is said to stand on the spot where baby Moses washed ashore in his reed basket. Be prepared to pass through a thorough security check before entering.

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The Coptic Museum

Mari Gerges, Kom Ghorab, Misr Al Qadimah, Cairo Governorate, Egypt

The Copts are orthodox Egyptian Christians. They were evangelized by the apostle St. Mark in the first century and currently represent about 10 percent of Egypt's predominately Muslim population. The Coptic Museum, founded in 1908, celebrates the culture and long history of this important religious minority. Some 15,000 artifacts are housed here, including priceless works of art dating to the very beginning of the Christian religion. In Coptic art you can see modern Christian iconography emerging from the old religions of Egypt, Greece and Rome. A wonderful collection!

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Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus (Abu Serga)

Old Cairo, Cairo, Egypt

This orthodox Christian church in the heart of Coptic Cairo is named for two Roman soldiers who were martyred for their Christian beliefs in Syria in 296. Some of their relics are kept in the church, but most visitors come to see the crypt where Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus stayed during their flight to Egypt. I found the variety of ancient columns, both in the crypt and upstairs, fascinating. Many different capitals, bases and shafts still bearing traces of paintings.

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Coptic Cemetery of Old Cairo

Religion Compound, Cairo Egypt

Walking around this cemetery in Coptic Cairo is like touring a miniature city. Little houses line the narrow avenues, decorated with statuary, columns and ornate doors. But don't bother knocking-- only the dead reside here. The cemetery is a nice retreat from the noisy streets of Cairo, but can be pretty loud itself if there's a funeral in progress. Mourners wail here, a custom that goes all the way back to the time of the pharaohs.

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Monastery and Church of Saint George

Misr Al Qadimah, Cairo Governorate, Egypt

Though St. George is located in Coptic Cairo, its congregation is Greek Orthodox. Like the Coptic Church, Greek Orthodoxy is among the earliest forms of Christianity still being practiced. The original St. George was built by Cairo's Greeks in the 7th Century. It was lost to a fire and replaced by the current church in 1904. St. George was built over the base of a Roman tower, which accounts for its round (unique in Cairo) shape. The adjacent convent is older, and contains a shrine dating to the 10th century. The wooden doors in the main hall are beautifully carved.

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Fortress of Babylon

Mari Gerges, Kom Ghorab, Misr Al Qadimah, Cairo Governorate, Egypt

Babylon Fortress marks the point where Lower Egypt meets Middle Egypt. Ptolemy's Canal started here, connecting the Nile River to the Red Sea. This made it an ideal location for collecting tolls. Various forts were built here beginning in the 6th Century BC, but the remains and reconstructions you see today are from the Roman era (red and white brick patterns). Augustus stationed three legions at Babylon to keep Egypt in check. The fort finally fell during the Muslim Conquest of 640. A good deal of what is now called Coptic Cairo would've been part of the fort.

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Al-Azhar Mosque

ش الازهر, الازهر, Egypt

Al-Azhar, which means "most resplendent" in Arabic, was the first mosque built in Cairo. It's also a university (the second oldest in the world), specializing in sharia law. The long history of Al-Azhar stretches back over various sultanates, governments and occupations. Napoleon closed it for a year after one of his generals was assassinated by a student. There have been numerous additions to the mosque over the centuries. Look for the Fatimid mihrab (niche), Mamluk madrasa (school) and Ottoman gates.

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Madrasa and Sabil of Sultan Qansuh al-Ghuri

Al Moez Ldin Allah Al Fatmi, El-Darb El-Ahmar, Cairo Governorate, Egypt

I happened upon this atmospheric mosque while wandering around the Silk Bazaar, and thought I recognized it from an old David Roberts print. Sure enough, it was the same place, virtually unchanged since Roberts' lithograph, "Bazaar of the Silk Mercers," came out in 1846. The patron of the mosque and madrasa (built in 1504) was Sultan al-Ashraf Qansuh al-Ghuri, last of the Mamluk rulers of Egypt. The interior is full of ornamentation and a massive suspended lamp. Another great find on the wondrous streets of old Cairo.

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Bein al-Qasreen

Muiz Li-Din Allah Street

We have the Mamluks to thank for the incredible Islamic architecture in this neighborhood near the Khan Al Khalili souk. Mamluk means "slave" in Arabic, and the Mamluk Sultanate in Cairo (1250-1517) was indeed comprised of soldier-slaves who grew more powerful than their masters and formed a dynasty. Their impressive palaces and mosques are easy to spot in Bein al-Qasreen-- just look for striped facades, intricately decorated windows, doorways, domes and minarets. One of Cairo's best walks!

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Sultan al-Mu'ayyad Mosque

Al Shrakia, El-Darb El-Ahmar, Cairo Governorate, Egypt

The site of this extravagant mosque was once a prison, crawling with fleas and vermin. The future Sultan al-Mu-ayyad was held there for a decade and vowed to replace the prison with a beautiful mosque once he was free. He kept his promise and the result is one of Cairo's finest buildings. It was constructed between 1415 and 1422 with marble and columns removed from other structures around town. There are two mausoleums: one for the sultan and his son, the other for the female members of the family.

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Bab Zuwayla

Al Motaz Ldin Allah, El-Darb El-Ahmar, Cairo Governorate, Egypt

Cairo used to be a walled city, and 3 of its original gates remain. This southern gate (dating to 1092) is named Bab Zuwayla after the Berber soldiers who used to guard it. Executions took place here, and the offenders' heads were displayed on spikes. If you're in good shape be sure to make the climb up one of the towering minarets. A spiral staircase will lead you to an incredible panorama of old Islamic Cairo. I loved looking across the city at its thousand minarets and down into the columned courtyards of mosques.

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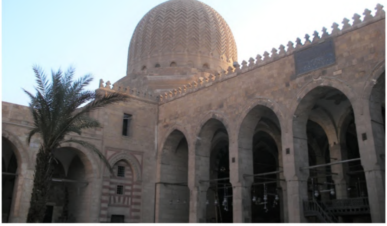

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Mausoleum of Sultan Faraj Ibn Barquq

Northern Cemetery, Cairo Egypt

This impressive mausoleum complex (completed in 1411) sits within Cairo's great Northern Cemetery, aka the City of the Dead. Sultan Barquq wanted to be buried in the desert near the tombs of the mystic Sufi sheikhs, so his son chose this spot at the edge of the Mokattam Hills. The layout of twin domes and minarets is symmetrical and included apartments for Sufis who would look out on the cemetery during their meditations. We went early in the morning and found the mausoleum nearly deserted, perfect for our own contemplations.

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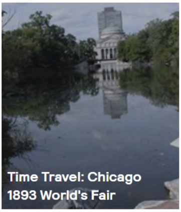

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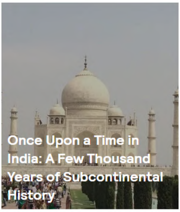

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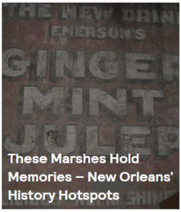

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