

Alexandria: watching the tide roll in

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In November 2016, I spent a month travelling in Egypt. Here's what I wrote about my time in Alexandria, the Egyptian port city made famous by its library, which was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.



Posing on the Corniche

We drove into Alexandria from the airport at around 1am, our driver slouching in his bucket seat and swerving between the other cars on the road one-handedly, as if he were playing an arcade game. In his other hand he held his mobile and kept up a jovial chat with a friend for the duration of the journey.

The other drivers were no less alarming. We seemed to be moving in a gushing convoy as if the other cars were not solid metal, but more akin to fish rushing downstream to the sea. Ahead of us was a tiny minibus that swayed all over the road and looked as if it would tip over at any minute. Our driver drew level with it and began jockeying for position. It was a wedding party. The groom was perched on the

windowsill, un-phased by the danger he was in, a look of stoic resignation etched on his face.



An apartment building just off the Corniche

The Hotel Ramsis was a charming relic from the days when Alexandria was a prosperous city. In 1950, this had been a cosmopolitan city of 300,000, 40% of whom were foreigners. Thanks to rampant population growth and General Nasser's nationalist chauvinism, today it is a city of 4 million, all of whom are Egyptian.

We had some very nice beans for breakfast, served by an incredibly dignified young waiter. The sounds of *Woman in Red*, *Careless Whisper* and then Celia Cruz *La Vida es un Carnaval* wafted through the dining room. The budgerigars chirped in their cage, and a little cat wandered the old marble floors.

From the balcony of our room, I watched a man on the next floor down as he tried to render a patch in the exterior wall where the plaster had blown. Since he had no scaffolding, he could only render

what he could reach from the balcony, so he was reduced to throwing render at the wall of the uppermost floor. Most of what he threw ended up on a corrugated plastic roof six floors below, which was already covered in muck that looked to have been accumulating for half a century.

After breakfast, we went for a stroll along the Corniche, all the way from the ancient citadel at its westernmost point to the new Library of Alexandria. It was nice to be beside the seaside, where the gutters were full of sand and the air smelled of salt. The traffic moved so slowly that pedestrians could drift into the road still immersed in their inner thoughts.

The city's cats, who may well outnumber its people, ducked their heads into stinking rubbish bins or languidly paced the pavements. Alexandria is a city of cats, most of them filthy, and they don't take no for an answer when you're eating your lunch on the street.

I lashed out with my boot when they got too pushy, but guiltily, for the residents of the city were very patient and kindly, towards cats, at least. In a very run-down park, I watched a man in a worn-out suit eating his lunch, watched by an expectant audience of 11 hungry cats. The respect he showed them as he shooed them away was quite remarkable.

The Corniche was lined with beautiful apartment buildings from the early years of the 20th century, each eight to twelve storeys high, and painted only as far as could be reached from a balcony. The windows were bordered by wooden shutters, covered in soot and dust like everything else in the city. "When did this city's people stop caring about how it looks?" I wondered.



I watched a very fat women hit a street sweeper on the shoulder with her walking stick. I don't know why she hit him. She was pushing a man I took to be her grown up son in a wheelchair. Maybe the street sweeper had said something offensive? What was remarkable was the theatrical way the street sweeper collapsed on to the pavement, groaning and whimpering like a child.

A small crowd gathered to watch, and someone helped him to his feet. For a moment the enormous women looked like she was going to apologize, but the sympathy of the crowd seemed to be enough for the street sweeper, so she waddled off. Her son looked back at the street sweeper from his wheelchair with a smile, as if in gratitude for giving him a good laugh.



Signs of the distant 20th century

In the shady side streets leading inland from the Corniche were grand, largely derelict Italianate mansions that would go for millions if they were on the other side of the Mediterranean. In one such side street, we found a grand double height arcade, where the shoppers were sheltering from the sun.

I browsed a bookstall selling shop-worn counterfeit copies of *Mein Kampf* and *The Protocol of the Elders of Zion*, Paulo Coelho and Harry Potter. It was everything you don't want to see in the literary life of a country: racist conspiracy theories, mystical fantasies of salvation and witchcraft and flagrant copyright infringement.



The night before, the government had announced that it was going to let the Egyptian pound float against the dollar. Floating the currency was a condition the IMF had stipulated if the government wanted to qualify for the \$12 billion bailout it was after. By the following morning, the Egyptian pound had gone from ten to the British pound to 17 - bad news for the country, but good news for the handful of tourists in the country.

We had a break from the heat of late morning at a café with Greek writing on the shop sign. There were portraits of famous writers, singers and poets on the walls, most of whom had their heyday in the '50s, around the time General Nasser came to power.

The owner was called Amsh (we called him Hamish). He said he'd bought his coffee shop from a Greek family that left the city shortly after Nasser's revolution. They had come back to their home city years later but had died shortly afterwards.

Amsh served us a delicious cup of coffee; he said his best beans were Yemeni, but he'd been unable to get his hands on any since the outbreak of that country's civil war.



Faces on the wall of Amsh's coffee shop

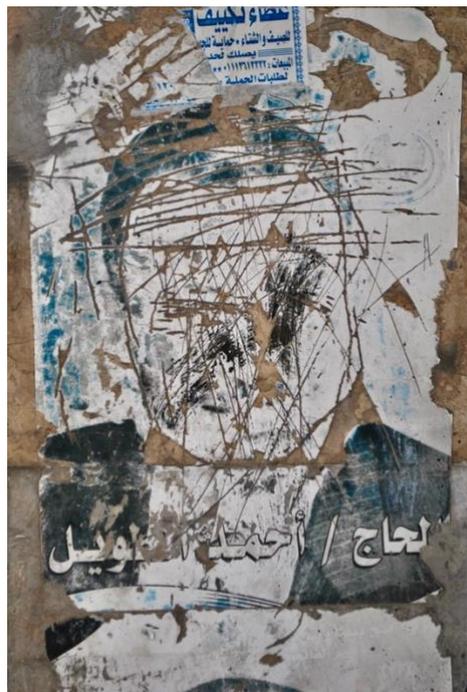
Amsh was a proud Egyptian. His country was the only Arab nation with a serious army, he boasted. He was proud too of his country's population growth rate, for it meant that the government would have more manpower at its disposal. Only five per cent of Egypt was inhabited, he told us, and the president had grand plans to reclaim land from the Sahara Desert for future generations of farmers.

I didn't like to remind him that if the Ethiopians have anything to do with it, the inhabitable proportion of Egypt is likely to get smaller, not bigger, in the years to come. The Ethiopian government is committed to its Renaissance dam project, and the Egyptians are rightly worried about how the dam will affect the volume of water that flows into their country from the Blue Nile, which has its headwaters in the highlands of Ethiopia.

Amsh's bold declaration of faith in his country rested on the army, which is all that remains of the heyday of Arab nationalism in Egypt. The economy is effectively run by the army, who ask the people to forgive them their incompetence in return for subsidising the basic necessities. Now, even that sop is coming under pressure from the country's creditors. The price of electricity had gone up by a third

that year and things would be a lot worse if it weren't for the economic support the government gets from the Saudis.

Be that as it may, after the turmoil of the Muslim Brotherhood's short stint in power, Amsh seemed happy to be back with the predictability of life under a military dictator. We made a few half-hearted remarks about political repression and economic collapse, but he just smiled awkwardly, as if to say, "Well, you would say that, wouldn't you?"



The writing's on the wall

We walked the short distance back to the faded grandeur of the Corniche. Outside the city's main synagogue a group of overweight, middle-aged, aubergine-shaped policemen in white uniforms and black berets were lounging in plastic chairs. Outside the courthouse, women in white hijabs were being led from armoured police vans in handcuffs, followed by entire truckloads of male prisoners. Practically every public building we passed was surrounded by six-foot high concave concrete blocks designed to resist explosions. The entire city was under a rolling lockdown, part of the Egyptian government's ongoing 'war on terror.'



Watching the tide roll in on the Corniche

That evening we had a drink at the Cap D'Or, a wonderful relic from the good old days of seafaring and beer drinking. The double height room had been painted a fetching Prussian blue. There were big model sailing ships on the wooden shelves, and framed photographs of big wooden sailing ships on the walls.

The place was practically empty. A black man in a fez, who might have been Sudanese, was folding napkins at a table, while the oversized old patron, who was probably Greek, sat in the corner puffing on a cigar.

We fell in with three young estate agents, who were the only other customers in the place. Said was wearing an American football shirt with the words 'Edit your Soul' on the front. He wore glasses and looked to be an intellectual. He told me that his name means 'happy' in Arabic.

The three of them had been friends since they were kids. They blabbed excitedly about the football and showed us their favourite clips of Thierry Henry and Memet Ozul on their phones. When I mentioned that we'd just spent a month in Iran, Said said that Egyptians were not allowed to visit Iran. Of course, he'd love to visit

other countries, but the government made it hard for people to leave. Not that he wanted to go to Iran – the Shia were no good, he said. They didn't believe in the Prophet and went around whipping themselves. "And now they have nuclear weapons, just like the South Koreans," he added. "Big problem!"

I asked Said about the Muslim Brotherhood. They were done and dusted, he said. I asked him about all the prisoners we'd seen outside the courthouse. He said they must have been something to do with the drugs trade.

And then it was time to watch the big game on TV. It was a pathetic contest between cheats and cry babies. The players were all too quick to go to ground and rolled around on the pitch at every chance. They made every pretence of abiding by the rules, but they too had been corrupted. Like the rest of the country, they did whatever they wanted, and expected to get away with it.

The spectacle had no spectators, for football fans have been barred from going to matches since a murderous battle between rival fans, shortly before the revolution that toppled Hosni Mubarek in 2011. Attending football matches has been banned ever since, so everyone watches the games on TV. There were rumours that the secret services were involved in the killings, though how and why, none of the estate agents could tell us.



I'd left my computer cable in the hostel where we stayed in Almaty, so I had no choice but fork out £200 for a replacement at a computer parts shop in the 'City Centre' mall. It was six or so miles up the coast, far from the mess of downtown Alexandria.

As we got closer, the number of BMWs and Mercedes on the road increased. 'Welcome to your Private World,' said the awning over the entrance. The mall was a huge, air-conditioned oasis of globalised decency, hygiene and flat lighting, where omni-consumers browsed Marks and Spencer, Costa and Pizza Hut, paying much the same prices as they would have in the UK.

I'd seen the same all over the Third World – there was money around all right, probably made long ago, but there were no worthwhile enterprises in which to invest. So the old families, or what was left of them, invested their money overseas, and lived off rent, interest and dividends, which they spent in these ghettos of globalised goodness.

The old Lada taxi that took me back into town was driven by another proud, overfed man. He had a look of restrained malevolence on his face and chain-smoked his way through the traffic fumes. The old red and white leather seats were dusty and decorated with the pirate's skull and crossbones. True to his piratical leanings, the old bastard charged me £7.50 for the two-mile journey.



When I got back to the hotel, Liam introduced me to a young woman called Shaima, who he'd met while photographing some abandoned buildings. She couldn't stay long, she said, as she was off to see her therapist, a man she called 'Captain Islam.'

Shaima was 20, and an English Literature student. Her first novel was already in the bookshops, but she was too depressed to write anymore. She talked about going to live by the sea. "But Alexandria is by the sea," Liam pointed out. "No, I mean Sharm el-Sheikh," she said.

I asked her about her novel. She said it was about a painting that haunted the artist who had painted it. Her mum didn't approve of her story; she said it frightened her. Her mum had been jumpy ever since she divorced Shaima's father. He'd been having an affair with another woman, she said.

Shaima had recently developed an interest in western religious art and had put up a picture of the Virgin Mary on her bedroom wall. Her brother said that it was *haram* – forbidden - to depict the human face in a painting, but that hadn't put her off. Her brother didn't understand art and neither did her friends. They were very immature, she told us.

Liam asked her if she was in love with her therapist, "No, he's already married," she said with an embarrassed laugh. "Besides, it's too expensive to get married these days."

"There's going to be a revolution next week," she said abruptly. "You mean a demonstration?" I asked. I had heard that anti-government demonstrations had been called for November 11th. We were due to take the train south to Cairo on the 7th; perhaps we'd be there for the showdown?

Liam wondered if we might be able to watch things unfold from a balcony of the Hilton, which is where the western press pack assembled to watch events in Tahrir Square in 2011. But we couldn't afford a room at a Hilton anywhere, and besides, I didn't think it was going to be the kind of spectacle you could just saunter back to your hotel from.

I was reminded of an anecdote from Ken Burn's epic documentary series about the American Civil War. The high society of Washington D.C. knew little about war in 1865, for their country had been at peace since winning its independence from Britain almost 100 years before. When it became apparent that the United States was about to go to war with itself, the great and the good of the capital made plans to travel to Gettysburg to watch the opening battle. They travelled in hundreds of horse-drawn carriages, and when they got there, bought refreshments, took their seats in the stands that had been erected at the side of the battlefield and excitedly awaited the opening salvo. Shortly afterwards, they heard the whizz of bullets flying overhead, and within minutes, found themselves caught in the crossfire of a heated battle and had to run for their lives.



Completed in 2002, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina commemorates the original Library of Alexandria, one of the largest libraries of the Ancient World

We decided to skip the demos in Cairo and spend a few more days on the coast. That evening, I watched the traffic below the balcony of the Hotel Ramsis. Some emergency vehicles were sounding their sirens, but the traffic couldn't or wouldn't get out of the way. "That's when you know a place is fucked", I thought to myself.

The sound of car horns grew louder and more insistent. One driver began marking out a rhythm on his horn in protest. At what? Who was to blame for the state of the city? What was to be done?

“Maybe this is how it all starts,” I thought to myself. But the revolution didn’t start in Alexandria that day. By ten o’clock, the streets were empty, and the city had returned to silence.

Alexandria is a shambolic city and an indictment of years of administrative, economic and political failure. When General Nasser came to power in 1954, he told the Egyptian people that their country was finally taking charge of its destiny after centuries of domination by European colonialists. If what I’d seen in Alexandria was any indication, Egypt’s destiny is to sink under the weight of endemic corruption, repression and poverty. It felt like passing through a civil war in slow motion.

What can I say? Not much. When I was a student, I read Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and nodded along to his damning critique of how the West has perceived the Middle East. It was only when I got to Alexandria that I read what the British historian Robert Irwin had to say about Said’s book.

“The fact is that researchers cannot build anything on Said’s thoughts-dead-end,” he wrote. “He has made it difficult for Westerners to say anything critical about Islam and the Muslim world. You cannot do that because then you run the risk of getting denounced as an ‘orientalist’, i.e., a racist, an imperialist and other terrible things.”

Well, the old anti-racist, anti-imperialist Eric Hobsbawm was born in Alexandria, so I hope the post-colonialists who have come in Said’s stead will respect his right to an opinion, even if they don’t respect mine.

One of Hobsbawm’s principal concerns was the development of ‘identity history’, whereby facts are ignored, and myths perpetrated to serve political ends. In countries like Croatia and Georgia, historians have become presidents on the back of the popularity of their re-imagined histories of their countries. The growing willingness to disregard historical fact and impose in its place a mythological view of a country’s past is part of a turn to revisionism,

of which today's Islamists, Third World nationalists and identity fetishists are equally guilty.

Hobsbawm believed that historians should be the enemies of nationalists. With nationalism and 'identity history' to the fore, the world seems ever more hostile to the Enlightenment scepticism that Hobsbawm championed. These days, people are happy to enjoy the by-products of the Enlightenment – globalisation, peace and equality - while ditching the fundamental ideas – rationalism, scepticism and free enquiry - that made them possible.

In an interview he gave shortly before he died in 2012, Hobsbawm quoted Karl Krause, author of *The Last Days of Humanity*, as saying: "Clichés walk around on two legs, while men have theirs shot off." The post-colonialism that Edward Said championed has become a cliché, of limited use in explaining the mess that Egypt finds itself in, yet endlessly useful in the hunt for excuses and scapegoats.