



THE INNER OASIS BACK TO NATURE

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For centuries Egyptians have used natural materials such as mud brick and wood from the palm tree to construct their houses. This sturdy two storey building in Qasr village, Kharga Oasis, has withstood the passage of time and is still inhabited.





The local materials used in building these structures include mud bricks, products from palm trees and, what is even more interesting, ancient artifacts from local sources that are re-used and incorporated into domestic building. Some of these date from Pharaonic times. The 'ancient' is melded with the 'modern'.

Whether you stumble upon an ancient Egyptian temple in the middle of a Roman fortress as at Al Deir in Kharga, or notice the ancient Egyptian stonework used as a lintels (*attabas*) in the ancient city of Qasr, evidence of prehistoric, Pharaonic, Coptic, Islamic, Byzantine and Greco-Roman remains abound.

While recent decades did not produce any beautiful designs in the area, 'New Paris' is an exception. It is the home of an abandoned community that was designed by Egypt's best known vernacular architect, Hassan Fathy. In its own way it makes up for all the mediocre building of recent times. Fathy's community, which was never completed, was meant to be a model for all new villages being built in the area and uses the medieval fortress town as its inspiration.

He drew on the best local resources and combined them with his sustainable and energy efficient approach to design. His houses, with narrow lanes and covered passage-ways between them, had cooling wind shafts, domes and inner courtyards. These features were the Fathy design signature. For design enthusiasts there is much to see in the area.





This is a typical extended family dwelling. It is common for several generations to share the same house. Each time a son marries, a room or extension is made to the house to accommodate the new wife and the children that will be born there. Each home is a little community in itself.



Each of these homes was designed and built by its occupants using traditional construction methods and materials taken from the local environment. Many such houses grow organically and over time. There is no grand plan, nor architect or building engineer. The local men get together and build according to the owner's requirements.

Generations of the same family often build and live in the same large house. These traditional homes are naturally ventilated thanks to high ceilings and thick walls; each has a functional purpose and serves basic needs: there are no frills. Yet regardless of their simplicity these homes are beautiful. Local materials such as stained palm trees are used for beams. The shapes and lines found throughout are enchanting.

These local homes are not the product of a semi-industrial process of building as is used in many of our towns and villages. Often the process of building is shared with neighbors or relatives and does not entail paying those participating. There is clear evidence in the shape of the walls and the finish of the surfaces that these dwellings are the work of the people who live in them. There are no precise angles nor is there an obsession with perfection. Corners may be rounded, stairs uneven and surfaces bear the imprint of a hand or improvised tool. None of this matters to those who live in the house as it is an expression of their own personal view of life and makes a virtue out of necessity.



Mud brick is a high maintenance material, so these same people will return to do repairs and replaster the exterior from time to time. If changes have to be made to the house then this can be done easily as there is no demolition required as with a cement and iron structure. The mud brick can be recycled and replastered.

Decoration is simple and expressive of the occupants' piety or unaffected view of life.

This journey to the Western Desert by self-proclaimed city folk like ourselves was a rejuvenating and educational experience. These photographs are evidence of what features of the visit made the greatest impact.

Rather than going armed with a tourist agenda, we went with an open mind and lots of questions. Doing so, allowed us to see the area in the best way, through local eyes. Visually stunning and humbling, the desert's open space had a calming effect on us and reminded us that our homeland has vast natural, historical treasures unlike anywhere else in the world.





Surpassing the beauty of the oases are the famous white chalk Inselbergs of the White desert which are located 45 kilometers north of Farafra. In 2003 an application was made to UNESCO to declare this desert a protected area as a World Heritage Site. Park rangers are now based there and each specially demarcated area has its own regulations. This is a happy development as it ensures protection of this rare natural treasure thus encouraging more people to visit an unspoiled paradise. Currently, several zones allow campers to spend the night which is a must for all visitors. Sunrise and sunset are spectacular. The starry skies will leave you speechless. Ω



Above: Located in Qasr, this is a perfect example of the artistry involved in many of the local buildings. Hand carved wooden inscriptions on the lintels, elaborate combinations of stone and locally produced brick are not uncommon forms of decoration.

Right: This small rural community clusters around the local mosque. The buildings in size and appearance are an eloquent statement of a life lived in harmony with the surroundings.

