



**THE CAIRO
DIARIES**
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**Tom Markus &
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ORCHARD STREET IN OLD CAIRO

Hi, it's Linda here. I wanted to buy some Egyptian printed cotton cloth and was told, "Go to the Cloth and Clothing District." As a veteran of the "Costume Shoppers Brigade," I confidently set out on foot towards a vague location on a map. Spotting a back street up ahead, I zeroed in on my target and launched into a maze of narrow, sandy, unpaved streets alive with vendors and shoppers. I thought to myself, "I recognize this, it's like shopping on Orchard Street in NYC in the good old days." The wares of each narrow shop sprawl out into the street. Tables with goods for sale turn the street into an obstacle course. People jammed everywhere.

Tom has mentioned how the Egyptians sense of personal space is much less than ours. I was learning a life lesson on that topic. The lower the social class, the less personal space allowed. Turning around, it was startling to be nose to nose and looking directly into the hazel eyes of a black ghost. A woman of about my size and completely veiled in black. No, this is not mourning apparel. Every inch of her skin was covered-she even wore black gloves-except for her eyes that peered out at the world.

All around me was what looked like the cast of a Christmas Nativity Pageant-gone shopping. The women wearing full-length loose robes with veils covering their hair. Every man wearing a dusty full-length galabeya looked like he'd just arrived in town, having left his sheep home alone today.

A frenzied energy surged. Shoving through the boisterous crowd was the only way to move in any direction. Using my shopping bag as a battering ram was the only way I could move. Everywhere people laughing, yelling sales pitches, unintelligible Arabic conversations trumpeting loudly in all directions. A man stood above the crowd shouting, "Galabeyas! Galabeyas!" (the Arabic term for the loose traditional outfit worn by men and women in Egypt that is ankle length and usually has long flowing sleeves). The cry was accompanied with non-stop tossing of galabeyas up into the air to draw customers' attention. In every direction new clothes on hangers, new clothes in neatly folded stacks. Loose piles of used clothes on the ground. Shoes in boxes, shoes out of boxes. Stacks of sweaters. Rows of fake leather jackets. Fabric in rolls of cloth draped out colorfully. Piles of shirts, gloves, socks. New galabeyas, used galabeyas, in every color and condition.

I really stopped in my tracks at what I turned up next. Tables overflowing with stacks of new, brightly colored, lace bras and panties of the sort I'm used to seeing in Frederick's of Hollywood. What? Underneath the meek Muslim exterior lurks the secret world of sex kittens married to lusty studs?

Sensory overload and exhaustion setting in, I surrendered. I did find the fabric I was looking for. But I hadn't expected to discover a whole new world of Biblical images brought to life-and they were shopping.

Every day is a surprise in Egypt.

THE EMERGENCY ROOM AT THE MOHANDASEEN HOSPITAL

"If only *my* husband would wash dishes," said the cheerful doctor as she failed to staunch the bleeding. I'd broken a glass, slashed my little finger, and was unable to stop the flow with paper towels, so we'd headed for the reception desk to ask them to get us into a taxi for a hospital's emergency room.

The AUC Medical Clinic has an office to service the residents in our apartment building. It's open from 5-7 three evenings a week, and serendipitously it was open as we exited the elevator on the ground floor. After some comic efforts with gauze and thin strips of adhesive tape, the doctor decided I needed stitches, so she closed the Clinic, put us into her car, and drove us to the hospital. She came inside with us to ensure we got proper service, and then went cheerily on her way. That kind of friendly handling is not uncommon here, and it was certainly welcome. More surprising was the phone call at 11:25 that night. We get occasional wrong number calls, so I am used to saying "Sorry, I only speak English." She said, "I *am* speaking English." Well, her accent is pretty thick, and I answer the phone without putting in my hearing aids so as to avoid squeals of feedback, so I couldn't hear or understand her at first. She was just calling to make sure everything was OK. Did I need any pain medication? Phoning at 11:25 at night? It's a different world over here, for sure. Sometimes it is maddening. This time it was enchanting.

The doctor who stitched me up had a hesitant command of English, and while he threaded his needle he asked how we felt about Bush and Kerry. This was only a couple of days after the election. That topic dwindled after he said (we'd heard this often enough) that it didn't matter which one of those guys had won.

After sharing that he was Coptic Christian, he asked what I did. Then he wanted to know "what the American theatre was dealing with now." I didn't get

it at first, but slowly I realized that he assumed that theatre would be concerned with vital current social or political matters. I was chagrined to have to admit that most American theatre is merely "entertainment." His question made me think of American theatre in the 30s, when at least some of it was "about something."

Sporting a bright white-wrapped finger, we headed out into the warm night to flag a cab and go home to pack for our 4:30 AM departure the next morning for Cyprus.

CYPRUS

Tom had worked for two months in Cyprus, a few years earlier, and he had liked it so much that we decided to take a holiday there. We luxuriated for one-week in that island nation, and we recommend it enthusiastically for one and all. After three months in a "developing country," a week in a first-world country was really wonderful. Cyprus has beaches, mountains, archeological sites, beautiful weather, great food, and happy people.

Following David Letterman's format, here's Linda's and Tom's Top Ten List of Things We Love About Cyprus:

10. The fresh vegetables that don't send you running to the W.C.
9. The Crusader castle where Richard the Lionheart married Berengaria of Navarre.
8. The Greek Orthodox mosaics and frescoes in the Kykkos Monastery.
7. The sensational fresh fruit-sweet grapes picked off the vine.
6. Tap water you can drink.
5. The lovely open-air tavernas serving oven-baked kleftiko, the second best calamari in the world, and PORK!!!
4. Fine Cypriot wine with dinner.
3. The great Hellenistic and Ptolomeic archeological sites, including some memorable mosaic floors, an underground necropolis, and the theatre at Curion that looks out over the blue Mediterranean.
2. The dense cedar forest high in the Troodos Mountains.

And the number one thing we loved about Cyprus:

1. Unpolluted air to breathe.