



FIRE CAIRO

SMOKING SHISHA IN THE EGYPTIAN HEAT

► BY JESSE SHIP ► PHOTOGRAPHY, CARMEL DELSHAD

Be it shisha, hookah, narguilla, or gouza, most Westerners have probably come across the water pipe—If only thanks to *Alice In Wonderland*, where Absolem the Blue Caterpillar is seen lackadaisically puffing away while speaking nonsense and philosophy with poor Alice, who is lost in a feverish dream.

Much like myself on my last trip to Egypt, when I found myself lost in Cairo's snaking pathways as I trekked from Tahrir Square on a mission to the global office of the world's most recognized shisha tobacco brand: the venerable Al Nakhla, whose best known contribution to the world is probably their beloved Double Apple shisha mix.

But before I can even track down their offices, I take some time to relax in Cairo. Shisha cafés litter the streets of the crowded downtown core. I'm touring with the newfound Portuguese travel buddy I'd met upon arriving in Cairo at 3 a.m., and we hunker down at a spot off of the crowded Talaat Harb Street. A waiter comes over and rattles off a list of fruit flavours at our disposal that would make the Chiquita banana lady blush, but we go with mango. A safe choice.

Tobacco was originally brought to Egypt by the Ottomans, who settled there in the 19th century. They smoked pure tobacco leaves with a water pipe, but it was the Egyptians who added molasses, or massell, made from local coconuts, to give it the sweet flavour. For over 70 years, there was no rainbow of flavours on the market, other than the earthy shade of Virginia tobacco. The primary style was *zaghoul*, which is still the preferred flavour of your traditional Egyptian street corner shisha smoker. *Zaghoul* is rosey, smoky and woody, like a dark Cavendish pipe tobacco, and delivers a 0.6% nicotine hit rather than the 0.5% of the flavoured blends. It was only in the prosperous 80s



that the extra fruity dimension was added, and the craze really took fire outside of hookah-friendly nations.

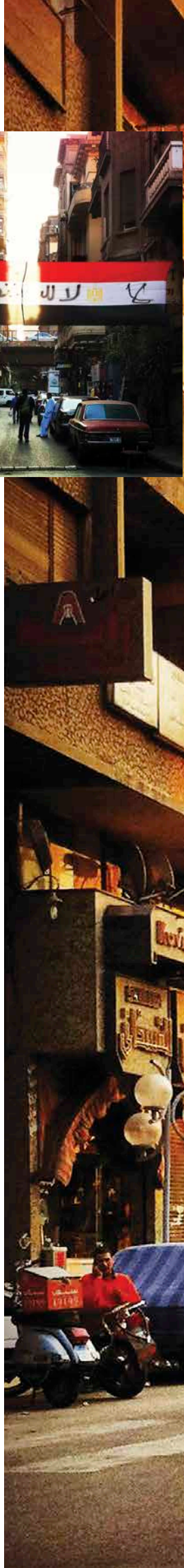
The familiar pipe, which varies slightly from one Middle Eastern nation to the next, is brought over to our table, but the authentic experience really begins when the piping hot coal is wheeled out from a portable stove, rather than the self-lighting briquettes that the at-home diletante is familiar with. After only a few puffs, we are adopted by a group of middle-aged Egyptian men, eager to teach foreigners the finer points of shisha smoking.

"One must inhale through the mouth, and exhale through the nose to get the full effect of the flavour," Hassan tells me, an engineering professor who actually did an exchange year at the University of Windsor in the 80s. He also stresses that the various fruit nectars served at our café do wonders to enhance the flavour of the smoke. I'm wary at first, since it's important to avoid anything made with local water, but he assures me that the juices are 100% fruit-based.

Thankfully, I made it through my trip with bowels unscathed, so he must have been right—unless I developed an unlikely and hidden tolerance for foreign water after a year of living in Taiwan. The banter eventually dwindles and we excuse ourselves, to wander home in the still blazing heat of the night.

Cairo is one of the largest cities in the Middle East, bursting with over nine million people, and my time spent there happens to be in the middle of a heat wave. Even at midnight, the streets are rammed with families. According to one of my cabbies on the way to the Egyptian Museum, the city shuts down when the weather spikes to 50°C, but the government is always quick to deny the numbers, as if they control the only functioning and reliable thermometer.

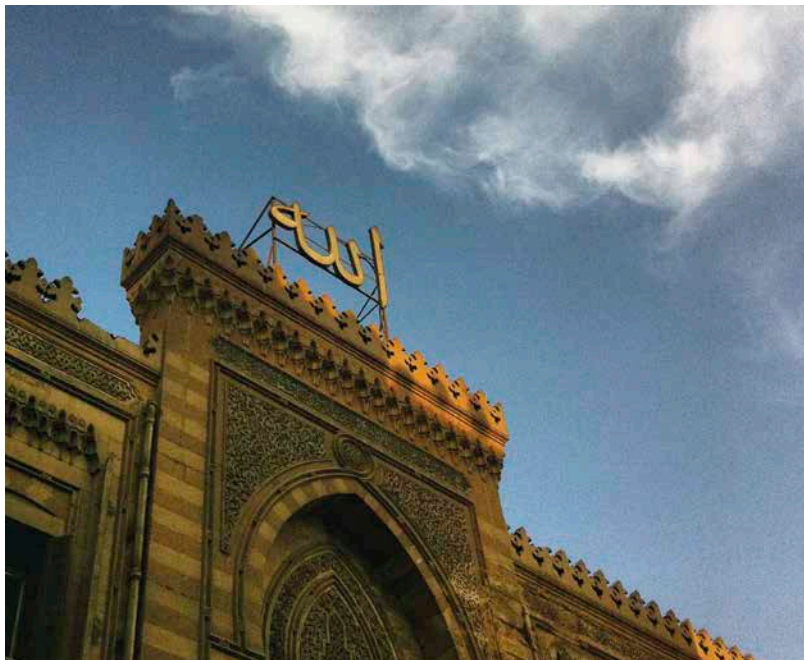
The extreme heat doesn't stop me from enjoying off-the-Western-radar delights like popcorn shrimp sold as street food wrapped in newspaper, like fish and chips. And then there's the koshary, the national dish of the Egyptian working-class hero: a cumin-rich macaroni and lentil salad topped with chickpeas on rice. How macaroni landed into the mix is a Sphinxian riddle to me, but it's just the right amount of exotic mixed with the familiar and comforting. And if you're thirsty after all that, as you surely will be, a fresh fruit juice stand is never too far away. I join a line of dusty throats, and sling back a fresh stein of hydrating sugar cane juice, slamming the vessel on the table, eyes wild with delight.







► Image, Bartosz Hadyniak



Despite my requests, I'm denied a visit to the Al Nakhla factory site in the agricultural town of Shibin el Kom. Instead, I am invited to speak with Ahmed Elibiary, great-grandson of Nakhla creator Saleh Mohammed Elibiary and an heir to the family fortune.

"When we first started producing flavoured shisha, our first was Apple," said Elibiary, who noted that people were astonished at the concept, but that the innovation didn't stop there. "And a few years later came Double Apple, an enhanced flavour." Al Nakhla currently has eight lines of flavours, from Sherazad—which has more feminine spices like cardamom and Earl Gray tea—to the ultra-hip mentholesque Ice Group with Lemon Mint or Watermelon flavour. Other novelty flavours you might come across include Jellybean, Cola, or Licorice.

Toronto has picked up on the shisha craze too—however, due to tobacco bans, the tobak experience is muted on Toronto's streets, as only herbal blends are available. However swank clubs like Cabana Pool Bar on Polson Pier and certain nights at The Guverment Complex's Sky Bar offer a veritable menu of this candied smoke. And then there's Awtash on College West or even street-level shawarma joints like Nora's at Spadina and Richmond, but for the most authentic experience, there are plenty of Middle Eastern shops in our city where you could find an authentic Al Nakhla taste of Egypt to enjoy with friends at home.

"In Egypt, [I] wake up early go to work, go home, [and] have dinner—but I'm still stressed," says Elibiary. "But by 9 o'clock I sit down by the TV and prepare a head of shisha to smoke. It lasts about an hour or so, and that's the way I end my day—it just takes the stress away."

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Amid Egypt's ongoing political turmoil and uncertainty, perhaps smoking shisha is a brief release, a period where the fears of the Cairenes can, for a short while, go up in smoke.