

The



Gallivanter's Guide[©]



IDYLIC PLACES FOR DEDICATED TRAVELLERS



The 4th floor infinity edge pool looks out to the Mediterranean at Four Seasons Hotel Alexandria at San Stefano.

David and I have been journeying to Egypt for the past 25 years. In Upper Egypt, we have looked in awe at the temple of Philae, marvelled at Abu Simbel, floated on the mesmeric Nile in lazy feluccas, trudged around Dendera, Esna, Edfu, Abydos, Karnak, Luxor, et al, and in Lower Egypt, have spent days in Cairo's Egyptian museum, gazed at the stepped pyramid of Sakkarah, rode camels in Giza, lunched in the oasis of Fayum, and in more leisurely fashion, we have bathed in the Red Sea and crossed the Sinai to St Catherine's Monastery. Been there, done that, got the tee-shirt? Well no; for like India, Egypt is not somewhere you do in one trip and then check off the stamp in your passport. Egypt is an evolving culture that does not begin and end with Cheops' great pile, but seduces you slowly with its effusive hospitality, cosmopolitan culture and ex-

traordinary cuisine.

If you have never been to Egypt, then by all means, take a Nile cruise (but make sure it is on the new Oberoi Zahra, which is the best by far www.oberoihotels.com),



Turkish coffee at Four Seasons Alexandria's Fresca.

follow a series of tour guides around the pyramids and the Valley of Kings, Queens and Workers; but if you have already 'done' Egypt in the traditional sense, then perhaps it is time to discover the other Egypt, which allows you time to savour its

less well known 21st Century achievements, its Mediterranean coastline, its Greek, French and Italian influences, and the exceptional winter sunshine that lures us from cold European climes to Red Sea sybaritism.

I know that some of you will berate me for covering so many Four Seasons here, but frankly, in Egypt there is little else of note. The old Oberoi Mena House begins its much needed refurbishment this month and, when completed, this could tempt us back to Giza, for its close-up views of the pyramids are awe inspiring. Oberoi also operate a very good beach resort at Sal Hasheesh, reached via Hurghada. Ritz-Carlton manage a resort in Sharm El Sheikh, but not of the standard you would expect of them. Sofitel operate numerous hostelries in Upper and Lower Egypt, but most, at present, are less than desirable. Unless you crave to stay in a tired, pack-

IN THIS ISSUE

Four Seasons Alexandria at San Stefano. Page 2. **Four Seasons Sharm El Sheikh.** Page 3. **Sofitel El Gezirah, Cairo.** Page 5. **Four Seasons Cairo at The First Residence.** Page 6. **Four Seasons Cairo at Nile Plaza.** Page 7. **Gallivanter's Gossip.** Page 8.

Gallivanter's Ratings.

✓✓✓✓✓ One in a million ✓✓✓✓ Extraordinary ✓✓✓✓ Highly recommended ✓✓✓ An acceptable choice ✓✓ Good in parts ✓ Go if you must

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Bedroom of Presidential Suite, #1903, at Four Seasons Hotel Alexandria.

aged Hilton, Sheraton, InterContinental or Hyatt, then Four Seasons it has to be, and to be honest, when you return to the perfection of one of their four Egyptian properties after a hard day's sightseeing, you may crave a touch more local colour, but the sheer excellence of service and comfort cancels out any criticisms.

Four Seasons Hotel Alexandria at San Stefano.

The owner of this brand new property hails originally from Alexandria, so you cannot blame him for wanting to impress the locals by recreating the glamour of Egypt's Mediterranean coast. Once, the great and the good would escape here from Cairo in the summer months, laze on the endless beaches, dress up for the Casino in the evenings, and stroll along the Corniche, past opulent mansions built by hordes of talented Italian designers. At the far end of the Corniche, the Greek area still flourish-



GM, Stephan Killinger.

es with manicured gardens, but the once elegant Italianate architecture crumbles with time and although the cosmopolitan influence of the French, Greeks and Italians remains, Alexandria is a city that rests more on its memories than on today's reality. Gone are the legendary Pharos Lighthouse, the ancient Library of Alexandria, the detritus of Cleopatra and Mark Anthony's fateful alliance, although fragments of the period may be viewed, carelessly displayed in the grounds of a 2nd Century Roman Odeon.

What we need is the realisation of French marine architect, Jacques Rougerie's spectacular design for the Alexandria Submarine Archaeology Museum, a unique underwater facility that aims to display the sensational finds of ancient Alexandria that lie beneath the sea.

Until then, though, the weather is balmy, the Mediterranean fills the view from your balcony and the service and cuisine far outweigh anything available here back in the 1930s. It certainly beats Cannes.

The 118-room Four Seasons was built on the site of the famed San Stefano Hotel and is sandwiched between the residential wings of the vast Grand Plaza complex, which also incorporates Alexandria's first shopping mall. Do not ask me to review its competitors, for there are none.

Although the exterior architecture is vast and somewhat brutal, inside the look is all European elegance, reflecting the strong cultural influences that still pervade this, Egypt's summer capital, where once the



Haute Lebanese at Four Seasons Alexandria's Byblos.

Greeks spoke French and just about everyone knew at least five languages.

The omnipresent Pierre Yves Rochon was the designer, but as the project was begun 10 years or so ago, his involvement was not, as you may suspect, a lazy choice, and it must be said that his designs are very pleasing indeed, especially in the lavish restaurants.

General Manager, Stephan Killinger is an ex-chef, so we were not surprised to find an array of exceptional chefs here and a much better wine list than in Cairo. Under Executive Chef, Eric Deblonde are no less than two Executive Sous; the splendid Richard Fuchs, who trained under Vito Mollica at Four Seasons Prague, and talented Frenchman, Erwan Laurenceau. Then there is Executive Pastry Chef, Manuel Mauerhofer and a top team of Restaurant Chefs; Moustafa Ramadan, Walid Baz, Adel



At Four Seasons Alexandria, from top: The Provençal style Kala restaurant. Italian café, Fresca.



Pool Terrace Suite, #401, at Four Seasons Hotel Alexandria at San Stefano.

Salama and Khalid Abdel Gaffar. The cuisine? Delectable, and not just in the formal restaurants of Byblos (haute Lebanese/French) and Stefano's (Italian). Even in the all-day-dining restaurant, Kala, standards are high, and in the delightful Italian café, Fresca, Khalid Abdel Gaffar cooks like a native Milanese! Even in the tea lounge, surprises are in store, with an amazing choice of teas, pastries and snacks.

In the summer months, even more choices materialise, from Bleu, an alfresco Tapas bar, to Sushi etc., which is just off the pool deck, and the Pool Bar & Grill itself, which ranges around the magnificent circular pool. The most outstanding restaurants, though are Byblos, where Walid Baz's cuisine is simply the best Lebanese we have ever tasted, and Stefano's, which could be in Milan, such is its authenticity.

The finish in some areas of the hotel is not yet up to Four Seasons standard, but then, this is early days. We also thought that the linking walkway between rooms and restaurants was positively bizarre, with its array of indoor plants and no



Four Seasons Alexandria's pool.

light to nurture them. The look was trying for Bellagio or Wynn, but failed abysmally. What did work was the free high-speed internet and WiFi, which was the best ever experienced in a Four Seasons. The two-storey Spa, too, shows promise and is surprisingly large for Egypt, with 14 treatment rooms. By late summer, the hotel's indoor pool and Kid's Club will open on the 5th floor, so Autumn would be a good time to go *en famille*.

Stage two of this development involves the beach, which is across the road from the hotel, but is accessed via a clever underground tunnel. This will, essentially, be a second hotel, including 22, 2-4 bedroom Beach Villas, 4 restaurants, two tennis courts, watersports, Kid's Club, second small spa and second pool. Scheduled for 2010, this could turn Four Seasons Alexandria into one of the top Mediterranean destinations for high-end families.

Right now, though, the hotel's existing accommodation is very impressive, although you must, of course, insist on a sea view. Some of the Four Seasons Suites, such as

#1701 offer set-back private terraces overlooking the sea and small no-view balconies at the rear, off the bedroom. Higher up the scale, though, Sea View Suites, such as #1705 offer double aspect sea views from sitting room and bedroom. On the fourth floor, you will find 13 rooms and 1 suite decorated in an entirely different style. The Pool Terrace Suite, #401 is light, contemporary and leads right out to the pool. It can also connect with a second room, so is perfect for families, especially when you consider that Pool Terrace rooms measure 63 sq metres. All the rooms, by the way, have flat screen TVs, and the suites



Chefs in Four Seasons Alexandria's Stefano's.

have plasmas.

At the top end, my favourite is the 1-3 bedroom Royal Suite, #1801, which is incredibly light and is also very much of the



The clubby Bar at Four Seasons Alexandria.

place. If you love the Parisian style, though, then opt for one of the lavish 1-3 bedroom Presidential Suites, such as #1903.

Delightful staff (many ex-Four Seasons Sharm El Sheikh), top notch cuisine and super comfortable rooms and suites help put Alexandria back on the map. A limousine takes 3 hours from Cairo, which is the hassle-free option, then you can fly on to Sharm El Sheikh and ultimately back to Cairo.

Gallivanter's Rating: ✓✓✓✓

Four Seasons Resort Sharm El Sheikh.

It is February in Sharm El Sheikh and the sun is shining, the beach is packed, the restaurants are heaving, yet everyone here is smiling. The resort's accommodation may



The bathroom of Presidential Suite #1903 at Four Seasons Hotel Alexandria has a stunning mosaic floor.

be ready for a refurbishment, but nobody minds. It's that old Four Seasons magic again.

I see Charlie Parker, the Hotel Manager, who we met when he was Rooms Director at Four Seasons Doha. I ask about plans for refurbishment, having noticed that they are currently rebuilding the resort's excellent Reef Grill that sits on the edge of the Red Sea. Charlie smiles and launches into a catalogue of renovations, new builds and improvements that make my jaw drop.

Many of the unsold residences here had been used as family accommodation for hotel guests. This was going to change as most of the residences have now been snapped up. The answer was to purchase the empty beachfront land beyond the residences and build 46 new guest rooms (most of which will connect), plus 6 suites and 1 Royal Villa with up to 4 bedrooms.



The Gezerab Pool caters to Sharm's Family Suites.

Another restaurant will also be sited here, together with a custom designed Kid's Club. Clever.

On either side of the long straight allée that leads into the resort, a serious, profes-



At Four Seasons Resort Sharm El Sheikh, clockwise from top: The beach. The funicular. Il Frantoio Italian restaurant. Corner of the main pool. Arabian style architecture.

sionally designed golf course will be built; two of the holes edging the sea. This should be a reality within the next 3 years. Meanwhile, though, the Reef Grill reopens as I write, with a much larger terrace and kitchens; a marine biologist and a yoga instructor join the staff, and management is scratching its corporate chin over which room designs it prefers, as yes, the existing rooms and suites here will be totally re-modelled, incorporating 42" flat screen TVs in all the suites, Bang & Olufsen in the Presidential and Royal Suites, and Bose iPod connections everywhere.

were there during a school break, I never felt overwhelmed. Adults were cared for equally here; Shisha pipes, Mezze and cock-



A standard bathroom at Four Seasons Resort Sharm El Sheikh.

tails beneath the white sailed Nafoura Lounge, jazz in the Observatory Lounge, romance in Il Frantoio, swimming in the adult-only lap pool, diving in the Red Sea. The cuisine is very good, from bountiful buffet breakfasts, to romantic dinners in



Stunning views of the Red Sea from the private pool of the 2-bedroom Presidential Suite, #123-124, at Four Seasons Resort Sharm El Sheikh.



Bedroom of Presidential Suite, #123-124 at Four Seasons Resort Sharm El Sheikh.

the courtyard of the Italian Il Frantoio. Even the Spa has improved beyond belief, as when it first opened it resembled an airport lounge. Hopefully, though, they will construct a larger spa on the new land.



View from Citadel lounge at Four Seasons Sharm.

The top option is a 1-bedroom Pool Suite, such as #136, although if you want the best sea views, then opt for the Tiran or Ambassador Suites. The two 2-bedroom Presidentials, with their expansive pools and vistas are superb for families or friends, and the Royal Suite even has its own secluded beach. At room level, opt for one of the 11 Panorama Sea Fronts, such as #162, as the views are breathtaking, but

even the Premier Sea Views are not to be ignored.

It was a joy to return here and I am not surprised that you voted this resort best in the Middle East and Africa.

Gallivanter's Rating: ✓✓✓✓✓

Sofitel El Gezirah, Cairo.

This towering roundel on an island in the Nile always had the potential to be a splendid hotel. David and I stayed here back in 1984 when it was a Sheraton and wished fervently that someone would make it shine. Well, after just a few months of re-opening, it looks as though Sofitel have got it right. OK, there needs to be an awful lot of staff training, as a hefty proportion of staff was inherited; but in many other ways, this is an impressive hotel, designed to appeal to those who prefer more contemporary interiors coupled with the relative tranquillity and isolation of Gezirah island.

The accommodation is well thought through, although bathrooms tend towards snugness even in the five Royal Suites. The finish, too, needs some work in places, especially around the glass shower enclosures. Otherwise, though, touches such as luggage closets and free internet access could teach a few European and American hotels a thing or two about guest satisfaction.

This is a big hotel with eight restaurants and bars; all fabulously designed by, yes,

you guessed it, Pierre Yves Rochon. He is rather good with the contemporary style and, apart from transforming the edge of Nile outdoor pool, he has created a very attractive indoor pool and spa and some wonderful Food & Beverage concepts, including Le Deck, which floats on the Nile and serves cocktails and snacks. Sud restaurant is a Mediterranean all-day eatery; so chic that it could be in London. The Buddha Bar is outrageously lavish, with



Sofitel El Gezirah's bread oven at El Kebabgy.

black-suited earpieced security on the door and Pacific Rim cuisine inside. My favourite restaurant, however, has to be Cairo's darling, the legendary El Kebabgy, which still



Table grilled lamb at Sofitel's El Kebabgy restaurant.

features its famed live bread oven (the best bread in Cairo) and exceptional Egyptian fare in a wholly authentic, unpretentious setting. Even President Mubarak eats here.



At Sofitel El Gezirah, view from the Window on the Nile Lounge & Terrace of Le Deck, floating restaurant and Bar.



The chic, contemporary sitting room of Royal Suite, #2507, at Sofitel El Gezirab, Cairo.

Le Vendôme is the French dining option, but as its tented dining room had only been open 2 days when we tried it, it was hard to judge the quality. The Nile views were sensational, but the style was old-fashioned and pretentious, with lots of silver domed reveals, and the cuisine was decidedly forgettable. Hopefully, this will change.

Over 26 floors and 433 rooms, there are 50 suites here. Booking on-line, as we did, could save you a fortune off the rack rate. Opt at least for one of the 35 Junior Suites, such as #1914; all with flat screen TVs and

pillows and duvet. I suspect you can change this at booking stage, although the website did not appear to tell me how.

Under veteran General Manager, Dino Van Eeckhaut, Sofitel certainly has the potential to shine. Only time will tell if it will.

Gallivanter's Rating: ✓✓✓+

**Four Seasons Hotel Cairo
at The First Residence.**

This was always my favourite Four Seasons in Cairo because I preferred its inti-

Hawaiian General Manager, Randy Shimabuku runs a tight ship and you can certainly not fault the service, but to our eyes,



Sofitel El Gezirab's pool is right on the Nile.

the hotel was looking tired. The rooms and suites, although immaculately maintained, were showing their age and the spa was desperately in need of remodelling. Thankfully, I hear that they intend to refurbish soon and will also completely re-design and expand Seasons, turning it into a proper Italian restaurant.

My greatest problem, though, is the extraordinarily high level of chlorine in the hotel's water supply. I have written about this in the past, but nothing has been done, so David and I literally rushed in and out of the shower each day, as the smell of chlorine gas is the worst I have ever experienced anywhere (other Cairo hotels are much more acceptable). Even the jacuzzis in the spa reek of the stuff, which is hard-



The light-filled lobby at Sofitel El Gezirab, Cairo.

plenty of space, including a guest loo. The 10 Panoramic Suites, such as #1916 are more traditional, but very residential and spacious, including a kitchen. Every single room and suite has a balcony or two overlooking the Nile. At the top end, choose one of the five massive Royal Suites, such as #2507, which resemble New York lofts. We loved this suite, although housekeeping completely missed our turndown, the shower leaked onto the floor and the king-size was entirely synthetic, including a Tempur style mattress topper and hollow fibre

macy and European style to the rather more brash Four Seasons Nile Plaza across the Nile; but on this trip, I was not so sure.



The sitting room of a Panoramic Suite at Sofitel El Gezirab, Cairo.



Four Seasons First Residence pool area.

ly healthy! A simple reverse osmosis filter would solve the problem, but nobody appears to care.



Giancarlo Gottardo.

The other concern occurred at breakfast one morning. Below us, there appeared to be a lot of noisy building work going on, so I asked staff what was happening. Apparently, the owner was creating two restaurants on the ground level of the property. Will these be run by Four Seasons, I asked? Staff smiled politely; but after pestering two or three people, I finally discovered that no, the



Tea Lounge, Four Seasons at The First Residence.

owner would run them, which is worrying.

We then dined in the just completed restaurant, Aura; a much needed third dining option here, casually positioned at the rear of the outdoor pool and serving rustic Lebanese cuisine. The food was fine, but the restaurant design was not quite what you would expect of Four Seasons.

The best thing about this hotel, right now, is the cuisine, under the hugely talented Executive Chef, Giancarlo Gottardo, who first wowed us at Four Seasons in Istanbul. Ex Four Seasons Doha, Executive

Sous, Anton Gasnier adds to the star mix, and in the splendid Thai restaurant, Lai Thai, delicious authentic fare is created by Chef Panya.

The Concierge service here is also highly regarded and it is, perhaps, for this rea-



Four Seasons Nile Plaza Susbi station in the Mall.

son that so many high-end guests from Europe and North America make this their Cairo base when exploring the sites.

Gallivanter's Rating: ★★★★★

Four Seasons Hotel Cairo at Nile Plaza.

Looking very plush and glossy, this big sister to Four Seasons First Residence has now settled down to top notch service and cuisine, under charming General Manager, Olivier Masson. Although we did not stay here on this trip, we did cross over the Nile for lunch one day and I was reminded why I enjoyed staying here last time, for every room and suite has its own balcony; many of which look straight onto the Nile.

Eight bars and restaurants, from Chinese in Spice, to perfect Italian in Bella, mean



View from a Four Seasons Nile Plaza suite balcony.

that you never become bored, and in the small but spectacular Mall which adjoins the hotel, designer names compete with a hugely popular Sushi restaurant, which is, reassuringly, run by Four Seasons.

With a spectacular collection of modern Egyptian art, a spacious spa, indoor and outdoor pools and sleek Deco Moderne furnishings, Nile Plaza feels younger and more energetic; altogether a very accomplished hotel indeed.

Gallivanter's Rating: ★★★★★

AT A GLANCE

FOUR SEASONS HOTEL

ALEXANDRIA AT SAN STEFANO.

Tel: +20 3 581 8000. **Fax:** +20 3 581 8080. **Internet:** www.fourseasons.com
Affiliation: Four Seasons. **Rooms:** 118, inc. 31 suites. **Approx Rates:** *Doubles:* US\$350-450. *Four Seasons Suites:* US\$800. *Pool Terrace or Sea View Suites:* US\$1,200. *2-bed Suites:* US\$2,000. *3-bed Presidentials:* US\$6,500. *3-bed Royal:* US\$9,000, + 29% service & taxes.

FOUR SEASONS RESORT

SHARM EL SHEIKH.

Tel: +20 69 3603 555. **Fax:** +20 69 3603 550. **Internet:** www.fourseasons.com
Affiliation: Four Seasons. **Rooms:** 200, inc. 27 suites and 64 2-bed Family Suites. **Approx Rates:** *Doubles:* US\$450-550. *Panorama Doubles:* US\$650. *1-bed Suite Doubles:* US\$1,200-1,300. *2-bed Family Suites:* US\$1,050-1,150. *Tiran Suite:* US\$1,500. *Ambassador Suite:* US\$1,700. *2-bed Presidentials:* US\$7,500. *Royal Suite:* US\$9,500, + 25.5% service & taxes.

SOFITEL EL GEZIRAH, CAIRO.

Tel: +20 2 2737 3737. **Fax:** +20 2 2735 5056. **Internet:** www.sofitel.com
Affiliation: Accor. **Rooms:** 433, inc. 35 Juniors, 10 Panoramic & 5 Royals. **Approx Rates:** *Doubles:* US\$310-360. *Junior Suites:* US\$650. *Panoramic:* US\$1,200. *Royal:* US\$3,000, + approx. 24% service & taxes.

FOUR SEASONS HOTEL CAIRO AT THE FIRST RESIDENCE

Tel: +20 2 3573 1212. **Fax:** +20 2 3568 1616. **Internet:** www.fourseasons.com
Affiliation: Four Seasons. **Rooms:** 269, inc. 43 suites. **Approx Rates:** *Doubles:* US\$340-490. *Four Seasons Suites:* US\$1,100. *1-bed Suites:* US\$1,300. *3-bed Nile, Presidential and Royal:* US\$5,500-12,000, + 25.5% service and taxes.

FOUR SEASONS HOTEL CAIRO AT NILE PLAZA

Tel: +20 2 2791 7000. **Fax:** +20 2 2791 6900. **Internet:** www.fourseasons.com
Affiliation: Four Seasons. **Rooms:** 365, inc. 77 suites. **Approx Rates:** *Doubles:* US\$340-620. *Corniche Suites:* US\$1,000. *Four Seasons Executive Suites:* US\$1,400. *Diplomatic Suite:* US\$1,600. *Nile Suite:* US\$3,000. *Presidential:* US\$7,000. *Royal:* US\$12,000 + 25.5% service and taxes.

Gallivanter's Gossip



ONE BLOCK NORTH OF GROUND ZERO AT 99 Church Street, Four Seasons have been signed to manage a second **New York** hotel, scheduled to open in 2011, with 175 rooms set in the first 22 stories of a planned 80 storey tower. 143 residences will make up the rest.

THIS MONTH, THE GORGEOUS **Cap Estel** on the French Riviera unveils Le Spa du Cap Estel, together with a new chef's garden and several enhancements in the grounds, including fountains, waterfalls and a small lake. www.capestel.com

AT SOUTH BEACH, **The Setai** is wowing guests with Jonathan Wright's new menus. Jonathan joined in May 2007 as the hotel's new Executive Chef. www.setai.com

THIS YEAR MARKS THE 20th Anniversary of **Amanpuri**. We are returning there in April to check out the new pool and Japanese restaurant, having first stayed back in 1988. Timeless is an understatement! Meanwhile, we hear that Hong Kong's SPG Land, who is developing the new Peninsula Hotel on the Bund, Shanghai (opening 2009), will also build a premium retail complex at 33 The Bund, together with **The Aman Shanghai**, on the site of the old British Embassy, employing The Pei Partnership Architects. SPG also plan on developing a further Amanresort within their existing **Huangshan Taiping Lake** project, which includes a Gary Player golf course.

LOOK OUT FOR the opening of **The Resort at Pelican Hill**, set in Newport Coast between Laguna and Newport Beach. Italian architect, Andrea Palladio sets the style, complemented by 36 holes of Tom Fazio golf, and by this Autumn, 204 bungalows, 128 villas (2-4 bedrooms and personal butlers) and a 22-room Spa will attempt to lure the high-end traveller. www.pelicanhill.com

NEXT MONTH SEES THE OPENING of Orient-Express Hotels' **Las Casitas del Colca**, a 20-room ecologically sensitive lodge in Peru's Colca Canyon, including one suite, and all with private heated plunge pools, set in a 24 acre estate and watered by natural springs. Feeding baby alpacas is just one unique activity offered! www.lascasitasdelcolca.com

IURGE YOU TO REVISIT Wiltshire idyll, **Whatley Manor**, for they have recently completed a stunning redesign of their Dining Room, which has proved so popular that everyone but everyone is queuing up to dine there. I am convinced that Executive Chef, Martin Burge is cooking even better than before, if that is possible in this, England's most accomplished Michelin-starred hotel restaurant. Our picture shows the Dining Room before the new paintings arrived. www.whatleymanor.com



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