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Passport to Cairo

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The pyramids of Giza will give you a taste of ancient Egyptian life. But visiting Cairo's markets and bazaars will give you first-hand experience of the day to day culture.

In this city of 7.5 million, the first stop should be the *Khan el-Khalili*— known as the Khan. In the Islamic section of Cairo, this labyrinth of shaded streets and alleys is surrounded by colossal *mosques* and *madrassas*, Muslim theological schools.

What is now the largest market in the middle-East was created in 1382 by the Emir Djaharks el-Khalili as a caravansary, a trading site with rooms for the traders, and a courtyard for the animals.

While the Khan (and the adjoining Al Muski market) is an excellent place to find souvenirs such as inlaid mother-of-pearl boxes, Egyptian drums and alabaster bowls, locals shop here as well. Take the time to enjoy a game of backgammon, like the locals do at the cafés, sipping a glass of hibiscus or mint tea, and some puffs on the *shisha*, a water pipe filled with fruity tobacco.

Those looking for atmosphere won't be disappointed. Decorative arches on one street alternate with canvas-covered alleys and dilapidated buildings on another. You'll experience déjà vu in this maze of streets, seeing shop after shop of store fronts framed with hanging brass pitchers, guitar-like instruments called *ouds*, and brightly colored textiles.

The market does, however, offer distinct areas within the Khan – streets with stores specializing in brass, gold, copper, perfume, fabrics, spices and even belly dancing outfits. Bargaining is not only expected, it's half the fun of shopping here.

If Chanel No. 5 is a favorite, stop by the perfume bazaar within the Khan. Egypt provides French perfumeries with some of the essences later diluted into perfume and eau de toilette. Egyptian glass-makers sell delicate perfume bottles, with gold swirls and delicate flame-shaped tops that, even empty, will look great in your boudoir.

Belly dancers worldwide shimmy to the Khan for high quality, inexpensive beaded and sequined outfits, which often includes a skirt, veil, bra and hip band. If showing bare midriff isn't your style, some designs feature a more subtle sparkling evening dress look.

After a few hours wandering the Khan, take a seat at *Qahwat al-Fishawi*, the Fishawi Café. Open 24 hours a day for more than 200 years, the café's chairs spill into the streets. Now operated by the Fishawi family's seventh generation, café guests include artists like

Nobel-prize winner Naguib Mahfouz, who wrote about life in the Khan in books such as *Midaq Alley* before his recent passing. Try sahlab, a milky, thick drink made with coconut, raisins and nuts, or a sweet, syrupy piece of baklavah.

Head toward the Nile to get a taste of a market catering to the locals. You'll find the *Wekalet El Balah*, the Dates Market, in the Boulak Abu Al Ela neighborhood. A century ago, ships from Aswan and other parts of Egypt moored, laden with dates to be sold here. Ships from Europe came later bearing inexpensive clothes. The market now sells a mishmash of items, including fruits, vegetables, car parts, shoes, chickens and textiles.

Camels might be hard to get past the customs agent, but that shouldn't stop you from waking up early on a Friday morning for the camel market, or *Souk el-Gamal*, in northern Cairo's Bil'esh neighborhood. Foreigners can watch traders assess the camels' teeth to determine age, their legs for speed and strength, and their mouths for health. Visitors without goats to trade can take photos, paying a little *baksheesh*, or tip, to the owner for the souvenir.

By the time you've finished with the bazaars, your wallet might be a little lighter. But you'll have experienced Cairo the way Egyptians have for thousands of years.