



Mohamed Aly Mosque

The Oases, an Artist's Paradise

by Hemmat Salah

THE oases of Egypt may be considered a real geographical museum for the people who lived in Egypt along the ages for they still retain monuments, traditions, customs and architectural styles dating from ancient times, that have been totally obliterated from any modern communities in Egypt. Hence visitors of the oases are mainly artists, researchers or tourists with special tastes who are captivated by the charm of the desert and the people.

The word (wah) is originally Coptic meaning "inhabited" and when the Arabs came to Egypt they did not change it. Before the Coptic period ancient Egyptians had known the oases by the name of (Otu) which actually was applied to Kharga in particular meaning the place for mummification; it was also known by the name (Wit) i.e. the mummy.

The various architectural styles in the oases are a rich source of inspiration for artists to study and contemplate. Often as not they become elements in their paintings which draw the attention of a wide public, who feel a deep wish to get acquainted with the hid-

den beauty of this region.

In Kharga, artists are fascinated by Al Sandaria district. It is actually an old Islamic village built underground. Its roofed alleys and old houses have a wondrous impact on the imagination. Formed of ten houses joined by an intricate network of alleys, where you could easily lose your way, it has three gates: one for entering, a second for exit, and a third for escape in times of invasion by people of the desert.

Al Bagawat tombs are another remarkable site, which artists frequent to study the development of architectural elements especially domes and arches, in the Coptic and Islamic periods.

The world famous Egyptian architect, Hassan Fathy drew heavily upon this source to develop his well known architectural style that depends on arches and domes as a solution to climate problems, in desert areas.

On the way from Kharga to Dakhla oases an artist can feast his eyes on the illusive desert beauty of the crescent-shaped sand dunes that stretch in different sizes all along the road. Another outstanding feature is

the strange natural rock and sand formations: rocks shaped in the form of statues and sand formations that change their colour momentarily with the advance of day and the approach of sunset.

House architecture in Dakhla differs from that of Al Sandaria district in Kharga. Here buildings rise two storeys high and are surrounded by date and-doum palms. In Al Kasr Islamic village house doors are made after the example of ancient wooden doors. Kufic inscriptions decorate the doum wood door linings.

In Balat village the most noticeable feature is the fascinating variety of alleys. Each is different from the other creating a strange effect as shadows appear and disappear suddenly impressing a strange unusual feeling on the beholder that can only be expressed in a painting or captured in a snapshot taken by a profession.

Untouched Bedouin daily life can be seen in Dahous oasis, where four or five houses only are a modest sign of the settling down of some Bedouins who gave up the life of the nomads. There veiled

Bedouin women refuse to speak to strangers; their faces are completely covered but for their bright Kohl touched eyes.

In Al Hindaw village a small simple folkloric troupe presents songs and dances from the oases heritage. Any visit to the New Valley should be ultimately crowned by seeing the Talinda Tomb, situated on a high plateau, with its popular style drawings, domes and openings.



The market place at Bahis designed by architect Hassan Fathy

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Egypt and Bangladesh

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give up either. One day, the Ministry official who, I suspect, was getting a little bored seeing me around virtually every morning, informed me of one interview he had arranged for me, making it sound like the hardest job he had ever done for a foreign reporter.

"Mr Ali", he said to me in a grave voice, "Colonel Anwar Sadat will see you tomorrow night in the office of Al Goumourtia newspaper of which he is the Chairman." Then, taking another look at me, he added, "You probably know that Col Sadat was a close associate of Col Nasser in the anti-monarchist revolution and is now the Speaker of the National Assembly."

"This is the most I could do for you," the official said a little apologetically.

Neither the Egyptian official nor myself knew that the man we were talking about was the

successor to Nasser, who led his country to victory in the last Egypt-Israeli war in 1973, then became the architect of peace with Tel Aviv in 1979, won the Nobel Peace Prize but was assassinated in 1981.

The memory of what transpired during the interview is hazy, like the faded photograph of the Colonel, described only as the Speaker of the National Assembly, and myself that appeared on the frontpage of the Observer perhaps in September 1956, with my despatch that was printed on page two.

Of course, we talked about the nationalisation of the Suez Canal and both of us regretted — I almost apologised — that the Government of Pakistan had been indifferent in its support for Cairo, to the point of being almost on the side of the Western powers on this issue. But Sadat did not think there would be a war. Among a few mistakes the Egyptian

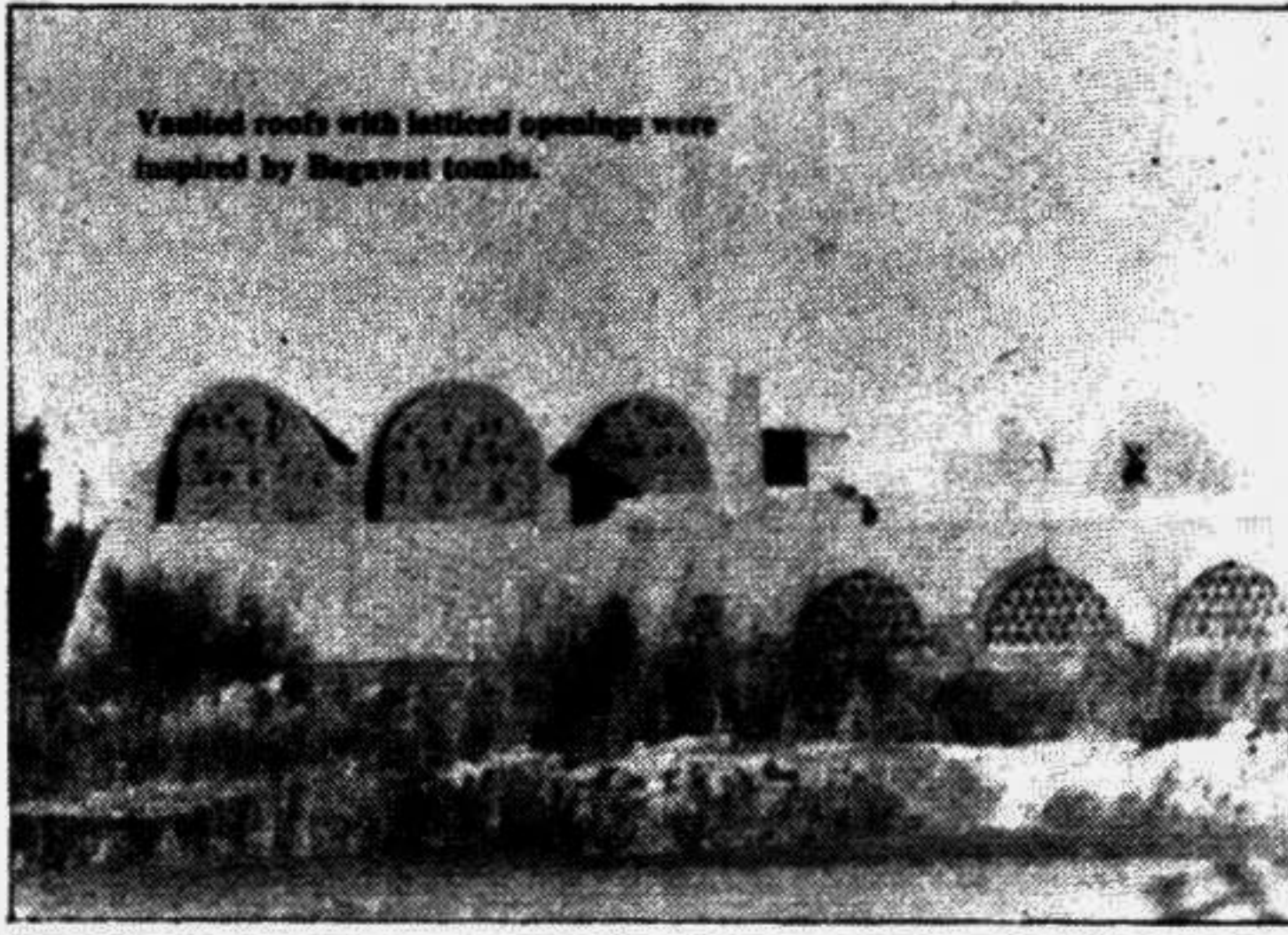
leader made in his chequered career, this was one.

"There won't be a war," I said to myself and decided to fly to Karachi in a matter of days.

It was a different Sadat — it was President Sadat, to start with — I met in 1978, after his surprise visit to Jerusalem and before his Camp David agreement with Israel.

As the Director of the Press Foundation of Asia, I was in Cairo for an international media conference. One day, nearly a hundred of us from all parts of the world, were driven to the presidential palace for an audience with the Egyptian leader, the man who had made history.

It was a different Sadat from the one I had interviewed more than two decades earlier. He had aged and looked a little tired. Answering a few questions, he said that he just did not know if a lasting peace between Egypt and Israel was in



Vaulted roofs with latticed openings were inspired by Bagawat tombs.

sight, not to mention of an agreement involving all Arab states.

Suddenly, I felt that he was a little unsure of the course of history in 1978 as he was in 1956, even when he himself

played such an important role in shaping it. But there was a touch of humility in the way he talked about peace. This was the most lasting, enduring impression I retain of the great Egyptian leader after all these years.

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