

A 'Royal' View of Alexandria

by Martha Nell Beatty

This May my husband Denis was sent to Alexandria, Egypt, on a two-month project for International Executive Service Corps (IESC). His job was as consulting architect for conversion of the Al Salamlek Palace into a luxury, all-suite hotel.

IESC, which is in effect an adult peace corps, sends its representatives to developing nations to share their expertise in getting projects off the ground.

Just recently IESC representatives in Egypt included the former president of Helena Rubinstein (Canada), a retired executive of Blue Diamond Walnuts who was teaching the Egyptians how to produce raisins from grapes, and a former hospital administrator assisting with the organization of a new hospital in Alexandria.

The Al Salamlek Palace is one of the former palaces of the Egyptian royal family in the 400-acre Montazah – certainly the most attractive part of this seaside city. The main palace, an immaculate fantasy, is still used to house visiting heads of state. The "Haramlek" (where the king's harem was formerly kept) has a museum on its second and third floors with private belongings of the former royal family.

Set between the former palaces is the Palastine Hotel, where Denis and I stayed. (I was able to join him for several weeks.) This we found to be the best hotel in Alexandria. It's one we didn't know, since it's not part of a chain (like the other deluxe hotels, the Sheraton and the Ramada), and it doesn't have representation in the U.S.

In this city of many decaying villas and palaces that are no longer inhabited by royalty, the Egypt of kings and royal families seemed a distant past. That is until Denis and I were invited to tea at the villa of a friend whose wife is Princess Faziah, the sister of King Farouk and the first wife of the Shah of Iran. This lovely, svelte and engaging woman brought the past tidily into the present for us.

Princess Faziah had lived at times in the Al Salamlek Palace as well as the Montazah Palace, which she convinced us is filled with ghosts. She told Denis how the Al Salamlek Palace had looked so that he could make the restoration more in keeping with its history. Although interested in his project, we could tell it would be too painful for her to ever visit the palace again.

Alexandria's present claim to fame is that of the most prominent summer resort in the Middle East. However, its past, from Alexander the Great through to Durrell's "Alexandria Quartet," is always there giving the city a mystique and making it a fascinating place to visit.

Side Trips From Alexandria

"Before Alamein we never had a victory. After Alamein we never had a defeat."

— Winston Churchill, *The Hinge of Fate*, 1951

Two especially interesting side trips are possible from Alexandria. They are to Al Alamein, which has remarkably beautiful, pristine beaches as well as the three major war memorials built by the Italians, the Germans and the British. Each is unique, each is stirring, each is sobering.

The other is to Rashed, where the Rosetta Stone was discovered, and where a very beautiful style of architecture from the 19th century is found. The architecture features a very elaborate "mashrabaya," a form of wooden lattice window screening to keep out the bright sunshine and to keep passersby from looking in.