

Travel Dairy - Cairo, Egypt

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The Difference: AirBus or AirCraft

Feb 22, 2005, Mumbai - Doha, Qatar

Alarm at 0215, ready by 0325 and at Sahara International airport in a taxi (booked the previous night at Anushaktinagar gate) at 0410. At terminal 2A, the crowd fully India - visibly plenty of them traveling for the first time - probably to make a living in the Gulf. I breeze through the check-in collecting my boarding pass - the guy at the counter surprised *Only this luggage?* - I am carrying one suitcase and 1 backpack. Immigration long queue - flight leaving at 0530 people not cleared yet - given preference - I bless myself for coming early (actually on time!). You stand for less time at the immigration if you come late - this does not make sense but then that is the truth.

Immigration cleared. Gate 6 - 0630 QR 201 announced. A long queue - just like BEST bus queue in Mumbai - all look Indian - typically dressed - very very different from what I have seen on my earlier trips. for a minute I did get a feeling it was an AirBus! The air hostess and the ground staff, pretty rash - just like a bus conductor? - no *please* (or seldom used). Inside the craft, supply food after a long wait (breakfast) and then collect the plates after a very very very long time - you sit nearly 1/2 of the flight time with the tray drawn in front of you with an eaten plate - call it raw manners! Soon after food, long queue at the toilets - when I visit it is soiled - can not blame anyone - probably a first time traveler. Reached Doha (capital city of Qatar, currency Qatar Riyal 3.6 equivalent to 1 USD) in time. I am expecting a Singapore like airport with so much space to walk around and plenty of things to see around ... I get off the aircraft .. get transported by a bus to the terminal - after baggage check I find that Doha is a little bigger than SDF V (Tata Infotech Office!) with 7-8 gates! No doubt when I asked a guy just after alighting if I could photograph ... he looked confused - now I know why? What is there to photograph! A duty free shop and a prayer hall and a couple of places to eat. You could round the full place up in 15 minutes flat without missing out anything - absolutely anything.

In Doha airport, pretty boring. There is a lady who is frantically calling using her mobile phone. Suddenly she stops speaking and comes to me. Do you know how to enable the phone. I say I will try. I try but the card is invalid. She says it can not be .. I say I am not sure .. she goes away. Doha is an interesting place. So many BMWs, used by the airport to transport the non-economy class passengers! Huge buildings. People who work in the airport seem to be from India - South - Tamil Nadu. Speak Tamil too!

Happens only here

Cairo, Egypt

Get down at Cairo - move out of the terminal - even before clearing the immigration I see plenty of guys with ply-cards - I am surprised because usually a visitor is not allowed inside the immigration check area - but then this is Welcome Cairo, Egypt.

Clear the immigration - not much of a check - looks like I am just walking from a domestic airport! - waited for a while to collect the luggage (1 suitcase!) - came almost after 40 minutes - Indian style. Nothing to declare - I walk past. The guy asks quizza? business? - I say yes. looks at the suitcase and then says OK. I have cleared all the formalities! I go out looking for ¹, who is suppose to pick me up from the airport and drop me in Al-Horeyya hotel.

I see no ply-card - I am hoping that it wouldn't have written in Arabic! I take one round ... exit and then again enter the airport building - then two rounds. No one. My mobile doesn't work² and I do not have a calling card, can not buy one - not available in the airport. I wait. suddenly I see a burly middle aged person waving at me - he has a paper (later I saw that it contained my photograph, which I had send earlier for him to identify me!). He offers to pick my luggage (very Indian) I manage to convince him that I should carry it myself (I don't recall if I carried my suitcase or he did) ... we reach the car (it is an old Merc) and off he drives (right hand drive). I ask "Seat belt" and says something .. but being used to putting seat belt on I put it on anyway. The drive is pretty quick, roads very neat and even and hardly any traffic lights (later I found that one can drive from anywhere to anywhere without crossing a traffic light; a place that one can cover on foot in 1 minute might however take 10 minutes to reach because you would have to drive over and under several flyover!).

What strikes me is that there seems to be people in uniform with guns every where. I am

¹I later learned that 50% of the people have the name Mohammad!

²<http://www.mouthshut.com/review/Airtel-70783-1.html>: I have been using AirTel for a while now (pre-paid).

Though service is not good (call center guys just keep telling ... Yes Mr. Farid when I have had to correct him .. sorry my name is Sunil etc ... Before I set up to go to Cairo I called up the Call enter and asked them the procedure (Feb 2005) .. just to be on safe side I called up twice on two different days (fortunately two different guys!).

Both of them said ... We provide service in Cairo of course I had to tell one of them that Cairo is in Egypt ;-)) that I could choose Vodaphone-EG after reaching Cairo ... then it would cost me 80 INR to make a call, INR 50 to receive a call and that an SMS would cost me 25 INR ... but I will have to call *131*0091222xxxxxx# and my call would be connected.

He also told me that You can not recharge there so you better put 3300 INR (I was tempted to fill INR 3300). I repeatedly asked him will it work? He was quite reassuring ... but my common sense got the better of me and I only loaded 1100 INR As soon as I reached Cairo .. my mobile was unable to make connection with the Vodaphone-EG or Mobnil (two mobile companies here) and there I go with INR 1100 recharge unable to use my mobile phone ..

I tried all the tricks in the trade (manual choosing etc) but none would work .. finally I contacted Vodaphone-EG .. they mentioned to me that the problem was with Indian company and not with them .. they can not help ... now how do I get in touch with Airtel in Mumbai

I cannot and I did not (though I asked one of my friends to contact the Call Center ... he returned to me with no useful information). BTW, I looked on the web pages of AirTel - they had a different story on how to go International roaming (very different from the *131*... this is when I gave up ... I mean a company as reputable as AirTel needs to keep its home page on the web updates (I am assuming that the Call Center Guy was right!)

Problem is you are totally lost once you are out of our circle. Now my INR 1100 is down the drain ... for no fault of mine? I do not even know how to air my views to AirTel guys ... Call Center ... I know what to expect ;-)

later told that this is security that is always on the alert (tells me that it is the military). It looks like there is no one taking a chance - the people seem to filter out their presence - but to me it is Oh my God. What are all these guys doing here? Any near every major hotel³, there are equal number of guys in uniform with guys and equal number of guys in civil dress - but burly and look very military; all of them facing the hotel with their backs to the road. Very funny to me, but I am sure they mean business. I am unable to communicate with Mohammad (I later found that even Hindi - assuming that is close to Urdu, also doesn't work - sign language works) and he tells me in broken English - *no English*. After some really long time I am dropped off at Al Horeyya Hotel, Al Horeyya Street, Helioplois. I tell the guy at the counter that I have a reservation (I had booked on the phone the day earlier from Mumbai) and he honored it. It is a 3 star hotel - a board signed by someone says so in the front lobby. Immediately a person offers to help carry my luggage and show me my room - for some reason I recent this and I thanked him for the offer but he followed me to the room to show me anyway. Immediately I notice that there is no water in the room and I call the reception to check if they arrange for water - no he says .. you will have to buy from our restaurant (very unusual I think) and there is no oven or microwave either - a huge fridge is however buzzing and a oldish ac unit. On the way to the hotel I call my contact in Cairo and ask her if we can start work right away. She has obviously planned everything for the next day (later I find that the boy and girl who have been employed for this particular work, start their employment only the next day!) I decide that it is time to survey to see how I should try and fend my dinner. I take a random direction and walk. See a couple of burly guys and quiz them "Supermarket?" .. they indicate that I need to walk further and then cross the road. I do that and lo I find a mini market. Looks like I can buy water, milk, apples, bananas, bread, butter, cheese, jam - there you go I found my dinner. More or less this was my dinner for most of my stay (In the whole of my stay I had rice on two occasions - a Chinese preparation in a huge mall and chicken with rice near a huge mask). Armed with the purchase I return to the hotel. It darks quickly and I have a 4 channel TV for company.

First morning my mobile phone acts like my alarm and it is the only function that I used of the mobile during my stay in Cairo! As I walk into the balcony I find that the whole street down has cars parked on both the sides and lo every car seems to be getting a wash (just like in India) with water flowing on to the road. Earlier the front desk informed me that breakfast would be served complimentary - I head to the restaurant because promised to pick me up at 9am. The service is pretty poor - though it is self service, you need to ask for any egg preparation to accompany your breakfast (I tend to believe that they would serve the same thing every day - but each day I had to ask them!). The spread is good - I tried to experiment with food - the Egyptian bread (more like our Roti) and some beans (more like Rajma) was a good filling but minus the chili it was bad on the taste buds. More or less I stuck to a couple of cheesed slices of brown bread with an egg (with tomatoes and cheese!), a cup of curd and a glass of fruit juice (orange) and hot coffee. This usually lasted me till after lunch lunch as I found was something that was ordered from a take away - and costed one approximately 10 EGP - point to be noted is that the sandwich is filled long bread (like the Subway serving). I found that most of the guys with whom I interacted never had their lunch - I was told that they eat and come and then they go back and have a large dinner - am not sure if it was to cut on the economies or appetite. So in variably I ended up munching my chicken filled sandwich alone in between work.

³hotel that flies colored flags!

The first day was full of introductions but I never managed to get the names of the people. A strong black coffee was something I was served by a boy - who happened to be one of the subjects from whom we captured the speech data. The second day, I decided to go early and check my mails before the work actually started .. but lo I find the office locked and no one around. Interestingly in Cairo all offices and residences are clubbed .. you could have an office in the ground floor and several people staying in flats in the upper floors ... surprisingly this happened in all the buildings in Heliopolis area ... the consequence of this was pretty interesting ... in the morning the roads would have cars of the people parked n the street and by the evening the same roads would be filled with parked cars of the residents ... somewhere in between probably all the cars would be in transit .. trying to move from one parked area to another ... in spite of the parking there was plenty of space for a vehicle to move on the road .. yes, the roads were wide ... neatly laid in terms of evenness ..

Since the office was locked .. I walked along the road .. within 10 minutes of my walk I see a person who is a help boy in the office .. he calls to me and motions his had to suggest that probably I was on the wrong road and not going towards the office .. my communication skills were poor and I am not sure if he realized that I had already been to the office and having found it locked was taking a walk .. I will never find what he understood .. but I walked with him to office. People spilled into work pretty late ... 11am is when I think work starts!

Thursday evening .. everyone is wishing everyone a happy weekend .. I am surprised but very soon recover and identify that Friday is a holiday followed by a Saturday (when people optionally work) and Sunday is a working day .. It becomes a little touch especially if you have to get in touch with people in India because you end up not communicating for 3 full days! Probably it would not be all that bad if you worked only in Cairo .. but with interaction in India it is a bit of a pain with misplaced holidays!

"Appointment at 12 noon but if you come at 11 am you can come and meet me and other faculty members" was the distinct message. I reached office to check my mails to make sure there was no change in the appointment time. I was to meet the dean of University of Cairo. A black and white taxi is a quick way of moving in Cairo. I hailed a taxi and having written down the place I was to go (you say University of Cairo - the taxi chap is not sure where to take you!) in English transcript (Hadinath Ed Haywan translated to zoo because UoC was close to a zoo) ... the First taxi guys say 40 EGP .. I was warned that the actual fare was 25 EGP but since I was a foreigner I would end up paying 40. I walk further and finally I end up bargaining through sign language and he settles for 25 EGP. He asks me to hop in and I get into the front seat to get a feel of the city ... we cross the Nile (can not remember) and he drops me at the university ... it is 1050 am .. I think I have done a great job of reaching well before time so that I can get a chance to meet the faculty ... I am wrong. I walk to the gate .. security again .. am stopped .. identity .. I say I am visiting the dean .. he checks my bag and reports to his senior .. he asks any identification? I had carried the email printout .. I show him .. he asks the junior to accompany me .. he jogs .. I run behind him .. after taking two lifts that fit just people we are on the seventh floor he shows me the office of the Dean ... I walk in .. but he says ... Our appointment was at 12 noon ... looks annoyed ... I want to tell him that he had given me an option to see him at 11 am .. but instead I mention that I can wait and offer my apologies ... but he accommodates (???) and orders for a cup of black tea and we start discussion and gets interested because our ares match ... he says he has some students whom he wants me to talk to and give them some guidance ... then I talk to the Chairperson of the department ... who offers me a chocolate from her bag and

says it is Cairo special .. chocolate with dates inside them ... she overheard my talking to the students and asks me if I could also talk to her students .. I oblige and I end up speaking to 5 batches of project students .. post this one of the student offers to take me to the Dens office (Dean had left when I was in discussion saying that he would like to meet me in his office after 1300). He is a busy man .. I wait outside for 10 minutes .. then I peep in and he asks me to sit with him .. I sit for nearly 40 minutes and he has a constant set of visitors .. right from the faculty member who wants something done to a student who has not paid fees - he talks to me in between saying that he has been to India and Mumbai and likes the place etc ... in between I say Thank you and try to move because he is too busy .. he says .. no sit down I would like to talk to you ... he wants me to meet his friend who has worked on Arabic speech synthesis .. but as luck should be he is not available and I thank him and walk out of his office .. I find my way to the entrance and walk along .. I find KFC after a 10 minute walk and I grab a bite ... on the spurt I decide that I should enter the zoo in the hope that I would find a zebra (not there in Byculla zoo in Mumbai) so that I can take photograph of it to show to Sumit (Sumit 3 years old seems to want to see a zebra!). The zoo is damn big with as many as 10 enclosures and lots of animals .. there is a charge for taking the camera in .. but the fee is very minimal .. less than a EGP .. unlike all other places of tourist interest in Egypt zoo is the only exception where they do not discriminate between a foreigner and an Egyptian .. else the pricing is as many as 20 times more if you are from outside Egypt. Egyptian museum (40 EGP while it is 2 EGP for locals), Seeing mummies inside the museum (60 EGP), Pyramid at Giza (40 EGP)

Cricket in India, football in Egypt. Punctuality is very similar to India - commitment probably as equivalent - laid down talk - people see to be free! *More to come*