

# luxury

ographers should come to this place because random pictures taken turn out stunning and curiously professional because of its natural beauty. We rushed back to the jeep before the mosquitoes attack us, and headed back. While the desert seems like a monotony of immense vastness, overwhelming but repetitive, Abdullah knows exactly where he is and can navigate from place to place as if he were in a city full of streets and street-signs. We suddenly stopped in the middle of the desert, where he set up a fire and made us bitter Siwan tea. He insisted that we would not leave until the whole sky was filled with stars, and within minutes the sky was illuminated.

Single rooms for foreigners are \$300 and \$400 for a double per night, including meals (and alcohol) and desert excursions. For Egyptians, the rate is \$180 for an all-inclusive single and \$260 for a double - a rather hefty price for an average long weekend. But the eco-lodge has proven a great success with socialites in art, fashion, film and diplomatic circles around the world. The British owner of an art gallery and art collector, Michael Hugh-Williams, has made Siwa his second home, and artists such as the Japanese Cai Guo-Qiang and architect India Mahdavi are regular visitors.

I asked Neamatallah why he targeted an upscale local and international market; "Targeting high-quality travelers forces you to perfect your product - you have to produce a high-quality product. I am targeting a discriminating market - a specific type of traveler irrespective of income. They are culturally minded and ecologically sensitive and they have high standards. If you want to service this market, you have to perfect your product." But apart from quality, there is a distinctly environmental logic behind the high prices Neamatallah charges.

"We can't cater to large numbers of tourists. Siwa is not Sharm El Sheikh. If you turn Siwa into a Sharm El Sheikh, you will kill the goose that lay the golden egg," he exclaimed. With the tone of a professor, he explained that, "Siwa is an oasis, it is a highly-sensitive eco-system. If you disrupt the natural balance, you risk damaging one of the few surviving oases that can be saved. The oasis has a carrying capacity. If you want to hurt it, you will focus on sheer numbers. But what you want to do is to get a higher value for its products. You want to maximize the natural benefit to the community while minimizing the burden on the environment."

He proceeded to introduce numbers into the equation. "If we charge two people 10

times what you would normally charge, we have saved the environment and gotten the same financial return as we would have if we had 20 people paying a tenth of the amount. If we were to neglect high-end travelers, we would invite a larger burden for the same financial return. Pushing for higher-value products guarantees that the environment is not over-taxed."

Siwa is still pristine, with 230 natural springs, but if the resource base is abused, by digging wells indiscriminately, Siwa will soon disappear. The ministry of irrigation digs wells as far as 1 kilometer deep, bleeding the aquifers, taking the water that feeds the natural springs - and destroying the *raison d'être* of the Oasis. The indiscriminate digging creates excess water, drainage problems and water logging, increases the salinity of the lakes, and destroys agricultural lands. According to Hany Assad, manager of the financial markets sustainability group at the International Finance Corporation, "If salination continues to increase, in 70 years, Siwa will disappear."

Of the roughly 20,000 inhabitants of Siwa, 15 percent are directly employed by the construction services, sub-contracting, and hotels. As a result of EQI's lobbying and demonstration effect, the governor has decreed that all new development in the area must be built out of *kershef*. While eco-tourism is very important to community development, generating financial and social benefits to Siwans, it is also a means of cross-cultural exchange. "The type of traveler that visits our eco-lodge always leaves value behind in the form of knowledge, lasting relationships with the community, including commercial relationships, rich cultural exchange, and informed technological contribution," said Neamatallah.

Indeed, high-end travelers are a new market for both Siwa and Egypt. The eco-lodge is effectively setting a precedent for Egypt as a high-end quality destination.

Siwa has become Egypt's flagship for socially responsible action - a model for how you can make profit and at the same time contribute to community development. Jesper Kjaer, general manager of the International Financial Corporation's Private Enterprise Partnership for the Middle East and North Africa (PEPMENA), stated that "This is a great model for eco-tourism in Egypt."

There are so many pristine natural beauties that could be protected through this type of tourism. Siwa is very fragile and could get easily ruined if mass-tourism made it's way. Eco-tourism is a unique way of combining preservation of local cultures



and economic development."

Neamatallah received his doctorate in environmental health and quality management from Columbia University, New York. He founded Environmental Quality International (EQI) in 1981 as a private partnership engaged in the delivery of environmental consulting services, but in 1996, Neamatallah decided it was finally time to implement the advice he had been preaching for years to his clients, in Siwa.

"We were confident that if we were true to nature and were to wisely manage the natural assets of the oasis, and engage the local community in the process, we would have a successful business enterprise and the community would derive a lot of social and financial benefits," he said. "We tapped into the existing wealth of knowledge and expertise that existed in such a pristine state - this is what the whole initiative is about. We built on the craftsmanship skills and building know-how. Without properly utilizing these natural elements, we would not have been able to realize what we have today."

Abdullah agrees that, "If anyone with a successful project comes and implements it in Siwa, they will fail. Anyone who thinks of real development, should do like Dr. Mounir, by depending on the skills of the local people, and their unique cultural heritage."

"Private initiative is at the core of sustainable development," said Neamatallah. "We want to brand Siwa as a hub for sustainable development around the world. I believe we can show a new path to social and economic development to the whole world."

*The ecolodge was recently rated #2 in the world by Condé Nast Traveler magazine in its Green List of Best Resorts for 2005.*



# An oasis of eco-friendly

By Nada Abdelnour

**C**AIRO: Who said "green vacations" were only for tree-hugging back-packers willing to rough it up, not shower for days and live off crumbs (or herbs in this case). And who said luxury cannot be eco-friendly?

In the lush green oasis of Siwa, 700 kilometers away from Cairo at the start of the Western Desert, near the Libyan border, development guru Mounir Neamatallah, president and founder of Environmental Quality International (EQI), has created the ultimate experience that offers travelers the luxury of experiencing the austere life of the desert, combined with a healthy dose of hedonism. And all this is environmentally friendly?

Neamatallah has created an eco-lodge, Adreer Amellal (White Mountain in Siwi, the native language) through reviving traditional oasis architecture using *Kershef*, a mixture of rock, salt and mud - a method that was used by Siwan master builders and craftsmen for centuries, but was being abandoned in favor of the blandness of modern cement, unsuited to Siwa's environment.

Rather than appearing like a kitschy Disney-look-alike, the hotel, which is sandwiched between a large salt lake and a mountain, looks like it is a natural part of the setting. Built with utmost sensitivity to environmental, social and cultural considerations, its color blends in with that of the mountain and its reflection flickers like a candle in the salt lake. Beyond are ancient olive and palm-groves and then the dunes of the Great Sand Sea, a vast desert that stretches as far as the eye can see. The place looks like it is stuck in a different era or in the after-world. Punctuated with silence, it's not only an escape from Cairo and other urban centers around the world, but if there's a paradise, it surely must look something like this. The ecolodge's labyrinthine structure looks like a series of sand-castles rising out of the earth - majestic, but simple.

"If there was a natural disaster in Siwa and all the buildings were destroyed, the material would reintegrate into nature, leaving very little debris behind," said Neamatallah.

Simplicity need not come at the expense of your comfort or that of the environment is the message of this eco-lodge. It is minimalist, but lavish at the same time. Simple, but elegant. If you are going on vacation to catch up on your favorite sitcoms or to chat on the telephone with friends, forget it, because there is no electricity and



As far as unspoiled, pristine environments go, Siwa is tough to beat.

cell-phones do not work everywhere. So switch off those phones and relax. I was worried about the fact that there are no air-conditioners or fans, but the 37 rooms are made of *Kershef* and palm-trunk ceilings, and although it was 38 degrees outside, this remarkable Siwan construction method mysteriously keeps indoors cool in the summer and warm in the winter. The bathrooms have running water and showers and the rooms have tiny-low-lying windows with wooden shutters, so that you can see the salt-lake while lying on your palm-reed bed. Don't pack too much because there are no cupboards; clothes are hung on reeds suspended from the ceiling by rope.

There are red Bedouin rugs on the floor. Beeswax candles light up the rooms and oil lamps help you navigate at night. At the other side of the mountain is Tamazid, a 7 room extension to the eco-lodge better suited for summer weather.

Behind ancient olive and palm groves, there is a fresh-water swimming pool fed by a natural spring.

Atef, the Siwan chef, uses vegetables and fruits from the eco-lodge's organically grown garden to create a gourmet combination of eastern and western delicacies. Each meal is laid out in a different setting and tables are covered with crisp linen,

French china, and British Empire silverware. For breakfast, there is an assortment of home-made jams including date, olive fig and marmalade, as well as cheeses and eggs, with your choice of toppings, including dates. For lunch and dinner, the chef makes pea risotto, fried courgette flowers, lamb tagines, stuffed cornish hen with fruit and date soufflé, among other delicious original recipes.

In the afternoons, desert excursions with Abdullah, a distinguished-looking Siwan who returned to his native oasis after completing a masters in philosophy and traveling around the world, is an unparalleled experience. In his 1972 Toyota land cruiser, he takes travelers on a roller-coaster ride through the immense and exhilarating desert, deflating his tires to mount and descend steep dunes. He makes you stop to see 3 million year old sand-dollars and shells where he tells you there was once a sea, and after an hour of seeing nothing but dunes with texture as silky as talcum powder, we arrive at a salt lake called Shiyatt.

Buried in between a sea of dunes, the lake is arresting. The lake is salty and you can nearly float effortlessly while you watch the sun set. At one point, we could see both the sun and the moon cornering the lake, green shrubs and flamingoes. Amateur pho-