

# S BLS

*Santa Barbara Life & Style Magazine*

*March/April 2024*



CALIFORNIA DREAMING

# A DESERT OASIS

*AL MOUDIRA'S PALATIAL PROPERTY IS AS  
IMPRESSIONABLE AS LUXOR'S ANCIENT MONUMENTS*



WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY *Alexandra Sharova*

**M**ythology and the rich history of Egypt have long called me to explore the mystical land. Although I made countless rough plans to visit with friends over the years, nothing ever materialized—it seemed the reality of the unknown was a hindrance. If I learned anything from my travels across Southeast Asia last year, it's that if a place pulls your soul, it holds *something* for you. So, I booked a one-way flight, solo.

A quick stop over in Giza to see the pyramids, and I continue to Luxor, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. After a short, albeit bumpy flight, my driver and I cross the Nile, effectively checking off a bucket list item—it is the longest River in Africa, after all. On the West Bank we pass sugar cane fields, donkey-drawn carts, and locals on walks. Isolated from the troves of tourists and kitschy shops, life is slower here, more simple. Golden Hour covers Al Moudira's terracotta facade with effulgence. The honeyed glow beckons and I'm drawn like a moth to a flame. An accommodating attendant assists me in drafting an itinerary for the upcoming days while I sip on refreshing karkade, a customary hibiscus tea.

I'm escorted through the central courtyard, passing a tranquil fountain glistening like stardust in the remnants of twilight. Antique vanities and plush daybeds sit below arches, befitting another time. *That's the idea.* The handcrafted wooden door of my suite opens to reveal what I imagine once resembled royal quarters of the region. Artisan-painted arabesques decorate the ceiling, drawing my gaze to a four-post bed that's naturally made with Egyptian cotton sheets. Between the change in time zone and climate, I'm exhausted. *I've waited over fifteen years to see Luxor; what's one more night?* I rationalize, adjusting a rosy "M" embroidered pillow.

If there's one thing you need to know about traveling to Egypt, waking early is a must to beat the swelter. I open the wooden shades, flooding the suite with light and warmth. The space personifies a color swatch: peach, coral, and

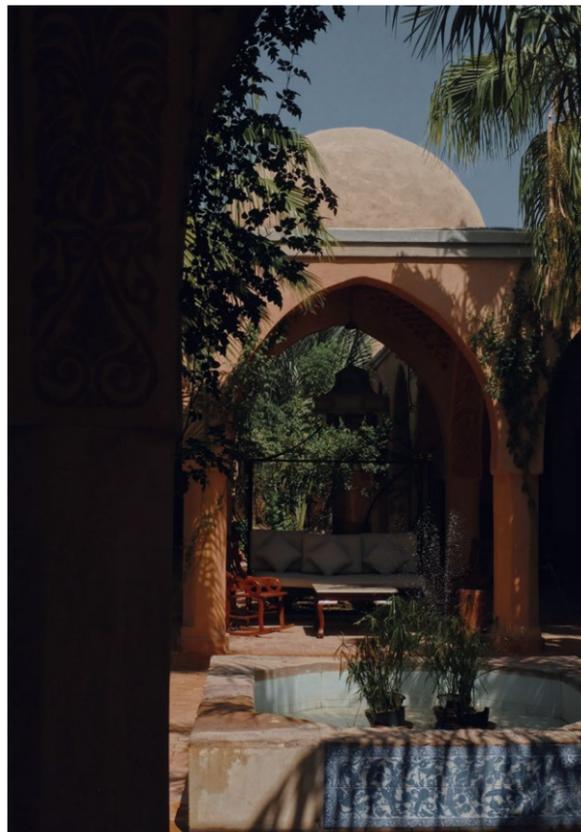
amber tones echo the surrounding terrain. With fresh eyes, I examine the details. The carved armoire, writing desk, merlot velvet chairs, and lamps are all sourced from palaces, private estates, and secondhand stores across the Middle East. Each piece in the 55 rooms, four villas, and three apartments is selected by the discerning eye of the founder, Zeina, whose essence is immortalized throughout the grounds. From its name, "Al Moudira," which is Arabic for the feminine of a "boss,"—given to her by workers during the property's initial build—to her favorite breakfast order.

Clad in white linens, I arrive at the Main Court with an appetite. The Eastern Bar holds an extensive breakfast buffet, while classic dishes are made to order. I journal my impression of Egypt so far, noting how safe I've felt, while enjoying creamy Greek yogurt topped with native dried fruits. Though I lean towards matcha, I always try local offerings. Unlike the variants in actual Turkey, the Turkish coffee here is more viscous, with a kick of spice. Jolted awake by the unassuming cup—renowned for its strength—I proceed to explore the property. Weaving through domed quarters, I find wings adorned with fuchsia bougainvillea and hallways that end in jewel-toned sofas. Painted glass accents crafted in Alexandria add color to locally made terracotta structures. I feel like I'm simultaneously in a museum and someone's very opulent home. A member of the prestigious Relais & Châteaux group, Al Moudira boasts a fruitful garden, two libraries, a spa with a hammam, a gym where yoga can be arranged, and three pools (two of which are private) for escaping the over-90-degree temperatures. And if "common" accommodations won't do, there's a 5-suite sequestered villa—once Zeina's home—that comes outfitted with one-of-a-kind art and a butler service. Needless to say, I got lost on more than one occasion.

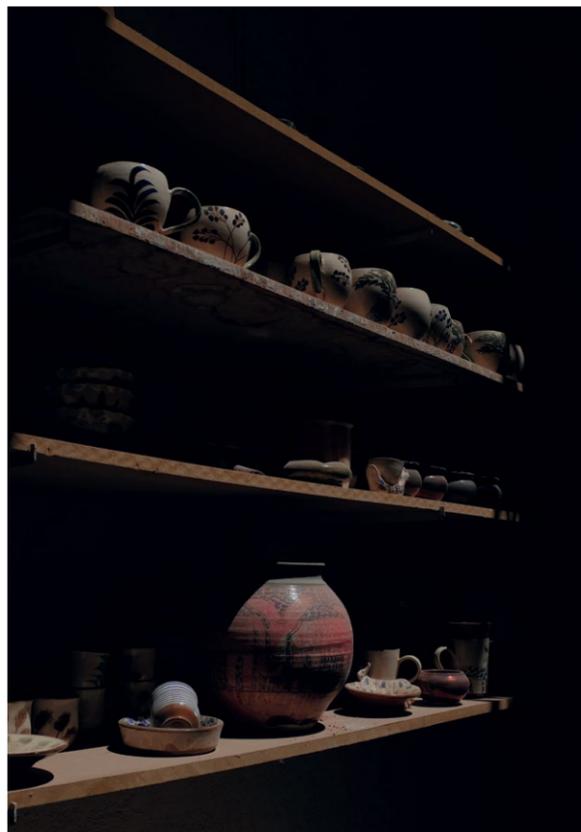
While taking photos, I nearly back into Eva, a fellow Russian who runs the hotel's boutique. Like everyone on staff, she's warm and welcoming. We instantly



TEMPLE OF HATHOR  
Dress LOTTA STENSSON



AL MOUDIRA HOTEL

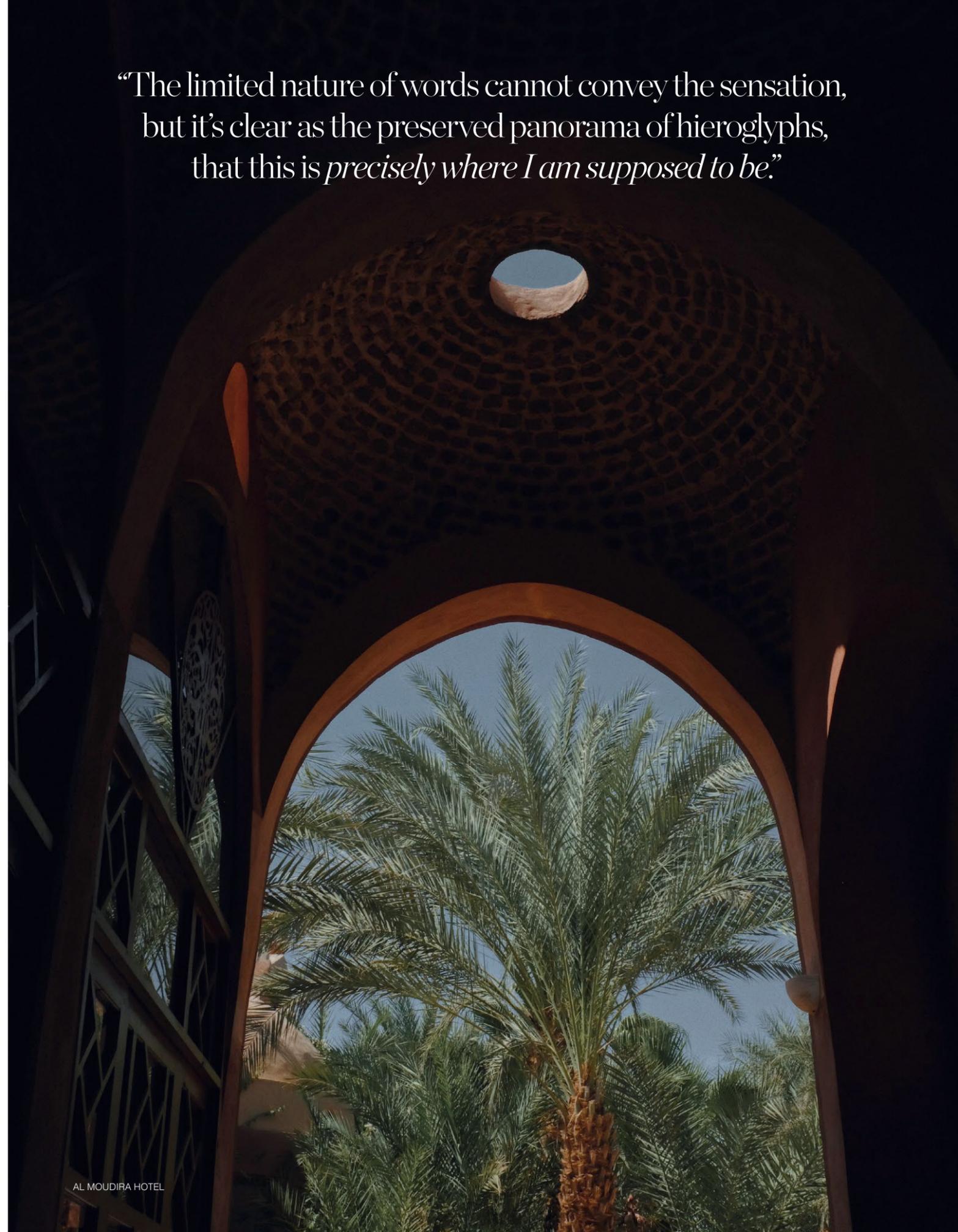


bond over our background and travels while drinking limonana—a mint lemonade born in Egypt around the 12th century. She tells me the property is primarily stocked with goods from local artisans, and produce that's not grown onsite comes from neighboring farms to support the community. Even the pillows on my bed are part of a giving-back effort through Threads of Hope. The organization, founded by one of the hotel's owners, empowers women in the region by training them in weaving and embroidery; they are responsible for the cursive "M" I admired before bed. I make a point to interact with locals when traveling, so I ask to see the pottery studio a few miles away. As we drive through the village, sand swirls like golden fairy dust. Cars are scarce, and the grandeur of Al Moudira is nowhere in sight, a reminder that the reality of life in developing countries is a stark contrast to the comforts of Santa Barbara. Several men sit on the floor making clay bowls, cups, and vases while others paint finished pieces. The china is striking, making me regret my carry-on suitcase. We chat about life in Luxor over sweet mint tea with the owner as kittens dart between our feet. On the way back, Eva points out an excavation project: a 3,400-year-old royal city was recently discovered.

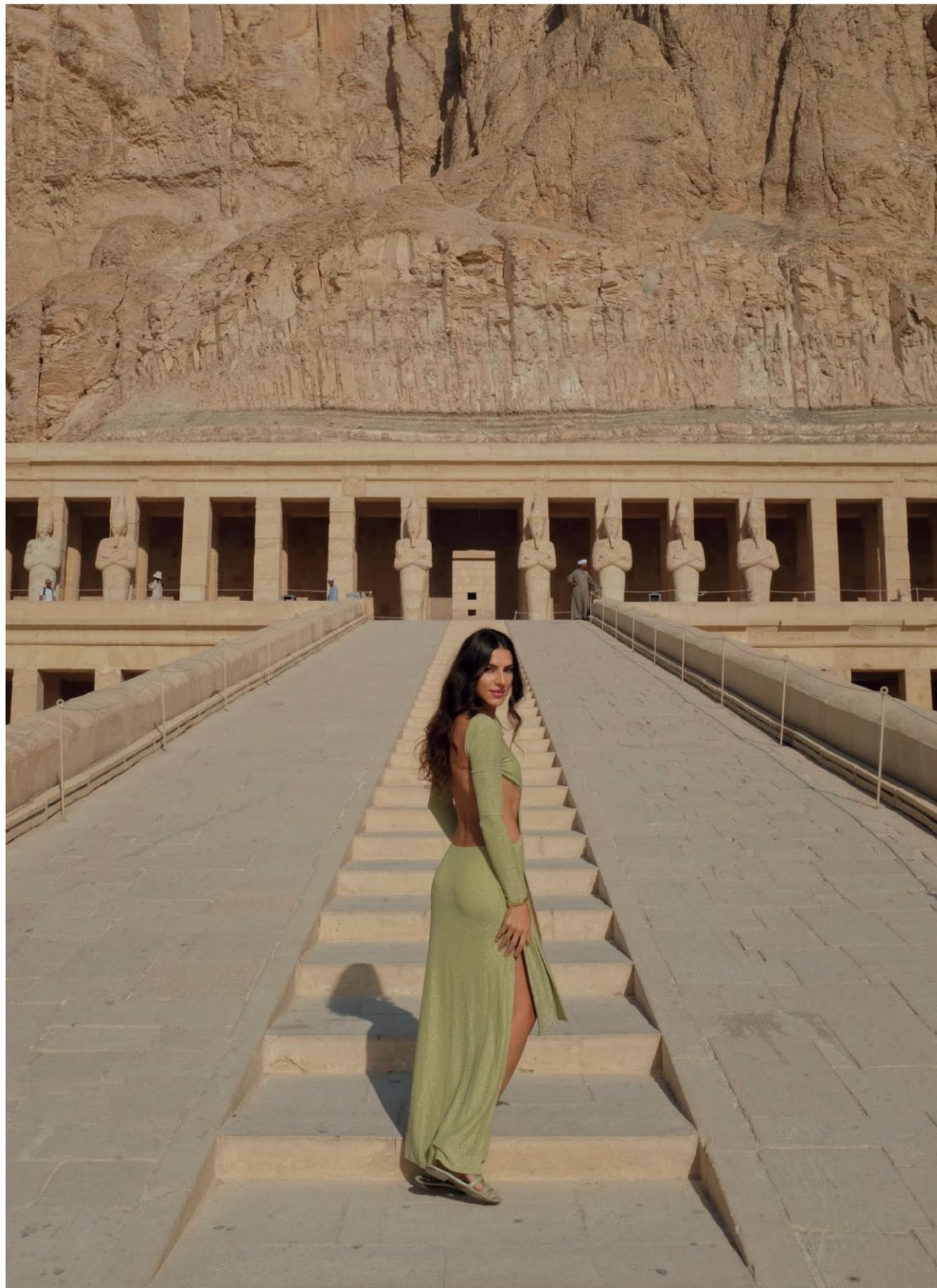
I awake with the sun, exhilarated for the adventure ahead. I'm heading to Qena, a city over two hours away due to slow roads and tourist restrictions, to see one of the region's best-preserved sites. Fueled by green juice, shakshuka, and various pastries, I meet Tamer, an Egyptologist, and my guide for the next two days. Our driver, Moustafa, is local and just shy of nineteen. I'm told that Dendera Temple was one of ancient Egypt's most important centers, housing three sanctuaries dedicated to a deity. Today, the grande Sanctuary of Hathor is all that remains. It's not quite high-season—that's November to March—leaving the attraction largely unfilled. *I feel it's a sign.*

An iridescent glow hangs like a halo above the entryway of the 60-foot-high structure. I step inside, frozen amidst blistering heat. Eighteen columns tower above me, depicting Hathor, the goddess of the sky, love, women, fertility, beauty, music, and rebirth. I take a few steps to the right and am engulfed by an energetic wave. Tears flood my eyes, but there's no sadness. The limited nature of words cannot convey the sensation, but it's clear as the preserved panorama of hieroglyphs, that this is precisely where I am supposed to be; I feel it in my bones. The initial impact subsides, and I marvel at the depictions on the ceiling: there's the creation myth, the story of Nut (a goddess who swallowed

“The limited nature of words cannot convey the sensation, but it's clear as the preserved panorama of hieroglyphs, that this is *precisely where I am supposed to be.*”



AL MOUDIRA HOTEL



MORTUARY TEMPLE OF HATSHEPSUT

the sun every night and birthed it in the morning), and that of Osiris—notorious for his dramatic resurrection from the afterlife. Over 5,000 years have passed, but pops of marigold and turquoise remain within intricate motifs.

Though the main hall is captivating, the temple's energy center is believed to be in a subterranean crypt. Tamer guides me down several staircases and through a tiny opening (note: this journey is not for the claustrophobic), where he translates the depictions on the walls. The next crypt is closed to the public, but luck is on our side; a visiting archeologist has access. I go in solo—it's that narrow—and am immediately confronted with *her*, Hathor dead-center at the end of the hall. She's hypnotic, and the space is all but buzzing with energy. I kneel to pause and take it all in, accidentally losing balance, essentially bowing at her altar... *Have I declared my worship?*

We return to the air conditioned car and head to our next destination, Karnak. It's nearly three, and I'm famished. Recently inspired by *The Grand Tour*, I've committed to trying authentic cafes and street food everywhere I visit. My classic Egyptian lunch consists of a foul mudammas—stewed fava beans with spices—sandwich. It's oddly delicious and gets me to the site. The entry is flanked by criosphinxes, who don the head of a ram and the body of a lion, representing the power of a pharaoh. Unlike our first stop, the colossal complex, which houses temples, pylons, chapels, and sculptures, is bustling with tourists. We end the tour at The Great Hypostyle Hall; at a sweeping 4,983 square meters, it's the largest single-chamber temple in the world.

I return to Moudira, enervated. My cool room offers a soft repose from the sensory overwhelm. I chug a carafe of water, nearly inhale the complimentary baklava, and finally head down to the pool. Birds chirp a calming melody, and scattered palms sway with lethargy through the hazy desert air. The silence here is unbelievable—no neighbors, cars, or heavy winds to rustle greenery. With distant crickets as my playlist, I forgo a guided meditation and let the lull of the desert take me away, or rather *in*. I open my eyes, returning to reality, which still feels like a dream. My pizza, from the wood-fired oven of the Poolside Pavillion, should be arriving any minute. I dive into the water, cutting through the liquid gold reflection of the fleeting sun.

By 6:30 in the morning, I'm already sipping on a cappuccino. Mostly couples occupy the surrounding tables; one is even on their honeymoon, as I later learn. Intent on learning from the previous day, I load up on

fresh fruit, an omelet, falafel, a mango yogurt, and a glazed-date pastry. Reunited with Tamer, we head to the Temple of Hatshepsut. A bevy of colorful hot air balloons hang in the sky. Dressed in my own version of royal garb, a backless floor-length dress, I make my way up towards the striking limestone structure that emerges from the cliff like a mirage. Erected in the 15th century BC as a mortuary for Egypt's longest reigning female pharaoh, the temple's size and splendor inform the importance of afterlife in the culture. Walking on the same steps as such a powerful woman once walked is surreal—the entire trip feels like a lucid dream. When we surrender, we allow the life we're meant to live to unfold in magical ways.

Along with throngs of tourists, I line up beneath the torrid sun at the Valley of the Kings, where over 60 tombs lay below the ground. The nearly 300-foot descent to Pharaoh Ramses V's burial room—later taken over by Ramses VI—is covered with engravings and hieroglyphs. Tales from the *Book of Gates*, depicted with ornate precision, are surprisingly preserved. Initially, the tomb was filled with everything the pharaohs would need in the afterlife: clothes, food, furniture, etc. When I reach the bottom, I am out of breath and drenched in sweat. The stagnant air and well-over 100-degree temperature outside creates an atmosphere akin to a sweat lodge.

I walk through four more tombs, looking out for the heart-weighting story from the *Book of the Dead*. Egyptians believed the heart was the key and would be weighed against a feather to determine if one lived an honorable life, granting them passage to the afterlife. Sticky and dehydrated, we head back to the hotel. I take my afternoon baklava in the daybed before returning to the pool for a relaxing dip. Dinner follows, and I actually make it to the Ottoman Hall. The mood is reminiscent of a glamorous gathering of the '20s, with live jazz and romance in the air. I opt for light traditional dishes: a beetroot and lentil salad with rich hummus and a vegetable curry over couscous. For a sweet treat, I get Halva ice cream. Although the food is delicious, the attentive staff who dote, ready to fulfill any ask with an inviting smile, make the evening.

The next day, Moustafa takes me to the airport. We stop along the Nile, and I go down to the dock—women walking alone can draw unwanted attention, but I feel safe. My travel mindset is: lead with heart but never ignore your gut; in other words, be as tuned in to your intuition as you are to the present moment. I film a ferry gliding across the glassy river, its vibrant flags dancing in the breeze. *What a life.\**