

Fayoum – a tranquil world just one hour from chaotic Cairo

Ecotourism activities in and around Fayoum Oasis Discovering Rural Life and Handicrafts



HANDICRAFTS AND RURAL LIFE IN FAYOUM

Being the most populated, fertile and productive oasis in the Western Desert, Fayoum has a thriving handicraft industry that reflects the ecological diversity and abundance of the region.

Baskets, made out of palm fronds in the villages of El-Alaam and Agamiyin, are among the most beautiful of Egypt. They can be found in all sizes and shapes and are produced by women at household level. The villages involved in basketry are currently producing for an increasing regional and national demand.

In Fidimin, a village just north of Al-Siliyin, a local crafts center serves as a training center for local children to become skilled in weaving, tapestry, embroidery or beadwork products and markets their products. The carpets woven by the boys are made of pure wool on cotton warp and come in many different abstract designs. The girls make intricate bead necklaces and produce fine tapestry and embroidery work.

Plain, utilitarian pottery goods are made in several places. But even though pottery making in Fayoum is distinguished by remarkable and unique methods that are following the traditional methods of the ancient Egyptian potters, only few traditional methods have survived until today in the Fayoum and several potter communities are threatened by extinction. Traditional potters in communities belong to the most marginalized and poorest groups of the Fayoum.

The Fayoum Ecotourism Project has developed a number of flexible itineraries that allow visitors to discover the traditional culture and life of the oasis through the theme of crafts. Pottery has been chosen as a sample craft.

The Potters of Nazla

The picturesque village of Nazla is a pottery paradise. Located about 35 km northwest of Fayoum City along the valley Masraf al-Wadi Canal, the village sits atop a narrow valley; cascading down the slopes are pottery ovens. Pottery is produced in open-air workshops in more than 15 pottery shops.

Nazla is famous for its combination of wheel-thrown and hammer-and-anvil technique pottery. Work is carried out according to very old and traditional methods that have not changed much since pharaonic times. Locally available clay is mixed with straw, ash, and grog to make the mud more comfortable and easy to handle during the forming process. The material is then shaped either free hand or with the help of a potter's wheel into various forms and shapes. Eventually, the pots are dried for two to four days before they are put in a smelter where they are burnt.

Traditionally, the potters of Nazla have produced utilitarian goods for the local and regional market, such as bowls to feed chicken, containers to store water, butter, cheese etc. But with the appearance of cheaply priced plastic and aluminum goods, the local market has decreased dramatically in size and local demand for Nazla pottery is low. 15 years ago, about 150 local families were involved in the production and marketing of pottery. Today however, this number has decreased to 50 approximately. Revenues are low, the profession is socially not highly esteemed and is physically demanding. Alternative employment opportunities in Nazla are limited. A lot of people have shifted from pottery production to the manual and dangerous production of fireworks (bomba al farhat).

The last remaining potters of Nazla are struggling to keep themselves and their ancient art alive.

Tunis

Tunis is a small village located on the south-western part of Fayoum, one of the most marginalized areas of the Governorate. The village is mostly populated by farmers that grow olives, onions, corn and bersim. But Tunis is also famous as an artist's residence. The village is presently home to 5 pottery workshops that produce, sell and market artistic pottery – pottery that is very different from the rough and utilitarian work being produced in Nazla.

It all started in the 1970s when Evelyne Porret, a Swiss artist working with pottery came to live and work in Tunis. After she discovered that the children of the area, while tending their cows and sheep, made toys, such as water buffaloes, donkeys, riders, dolls etc with mud collected in the irrigation canals, she decided to establish a pottery training center for children. Freedom in creativity and respect of natural talents formed the basis of this project.

The pottery training center that was eventually established consists today of different buildings that are constructed with mud bricks, vaults and domes. Each student working at the school has a personal working space and a potter wheel. The glazing, firing and exhibition spaces are shared.

The presence of Evelyne Porret attracted during the past 20 years other artists and later on also Cairo residents that were in search of a rural and picturesque week end destination. Today, Tunis is home for more than 14 artists that live permanently or part time in Tunis and hosts 3 different pottery workshops that can be visited. 2 of the workshops are recent start-ups of people that were once students of Evelyne Porret.

Will visitors during their day see more than just pottery workshops?

The main “theme” of the tours that have been developed within the framework of the Fayoum Ecotourism Project is pottery and mud. Mud, clay and earth can be found all over Fayoum. Traditionally, people build their houses out of stones and a mixture of straw and mud, local food storage containers, heaters made out of clay, etc. Yet, the here described tour offers much more. It takes visitors off the beaten tourism tracks in Fayoum through wonderful green areas with lush fruit gardens and fields, and along the shores of Lake Qarun and provides them with a rare insight in rural traditions and life.

The module has been created to allow for flexibility and the integration of different visits. For example:

- ❑ A stopover at the historical Hotel Auberge du Fayoum can be used to introduce visitors to the history of the Fayoum.
- ❑ A stopover in a small fruit garden in the village of Aboxa will introduce them to the rural life, crop and irrigation system of the oasis.
- ❑ A stopover in a traditional farming house can be used to introduce visitors to local social structures and show them how farmers live.
- ❑ A stopover along the shores of lake Qarun will give visitors the possibility to get to know some Fishermen, see how boats and fishernets are being constructed locally and learn more about the lakes.
- ❑ A stopover at a local olive oil and pickling company or at a fruit market can be used to explain agro economic system of Fayoum.
- ❑ A visit of the Ptolemeic temple of Qasr Qarun can be used to explain visitors Fayoum's ancient history.
- ❑ A camel ride through the agricultural area of south-western Fayoum will provide visitors with a special experience. They can observe people working in the fields, seeing women fulfilling their household duties etc. The camel ride can be integrated with a visit of Qasr Qarun.

- ❑ A visit to Wadi Rayan Protected Area will offer spectacular desert views, and can be used to introduce visitors to the flora and fauna of the desert. The visit can include a guided tour through the Visitor Center of Wadi Rayan Protected Area and the Waterfall area.
- ❑ A visit at the shores of lake Qarun in the late afternoon can be used as a birdwatching stop to introduce visitors to the birds of Fayoum.

Are there any food and beverage services available during the tour?

We recommend you to bring a packed lunch with you. The garden of the Tunis Pottery School with its shaded veranda is a wonderful place to have lunch. The school has simple sanitation facilities and can prepare tea and provide soft drinks. In the Waterfall Area of Wadi Rayan, 2 cafeterias offer fish and meat menus.

Sample Itinerary: 1 day discovery of rural Fayoum

7.15 am departure from Cairo to Fayoum. After a short coffee stop at the historic Auberge du Lac Hotel, drive towards the pottery village of Nazla. On the way, visit of a typical Fayoum fruit garden in the village of Aboxa. In the picturesque village of Nazla, we will explore the different workshops where products in all forms and shapes are produced according to methods that have not changed much since Pharonic times. More than 20 open air workshops and ovens are located along the Wadi slopes. Afterwards we will drive to Tunis, where we have lunch in the peaceful green garden of the children pottery school and have a chance to see young artists marking their wares and purchase crafts. We will then spend some time exploring the rural village of Tunis before we drive to Qasr Qarun, a Ptolemaic temple located in the southwestern area of Fayoum. We visit the temple and meet then a local birdwatching guide who will take us to Lake Qarun for birdwatching along the shores. Return to Cairo at 5 pm.

How can you book a tour?

The Fayoum Ecotourism project has trained a number of guides that belong to the Community Center of the Faculty of Tourism and Hotels in Fayoum. We recommend you to contact the Center or the guides directly to arrange for qualified guiding services and assistance.

Ecotourism means local community benefit so please remember all guides and local service providers are developing their skills through guiding and purchase local goods and services as much as possible.

Handicrafts and Rural Life Service Facts

<i>Contact of the Fayoum potters</i>	<p>Hosni Mohamed, Potter and Head of the Cooperative of Nazla Potters Nazla Tel: 084 771 231</p> <p>Children Pottery School of Tunis Evelyne Porret Tunis Tel: 084 820 405</p> <p>Abdel Sattar Potter, Tunis Tel: 084 820 827</p>
<i>Guide for crafts in Fayoum</i>	<p>Khairi Yassin Craft Coordinator Egypt Craft Center Tunis, Fayoum Tel: 084 820 312 / 010 3656 773 Khairi is familiar with several craft producing communities in Fayoum and can facilitate and guide visits. He has Arabic and basic English skills.</p>
<i>Language skills of potters</i>	<p>Arabic. Evelyne Porret speaks French. The other potters do all have basic English skills.</p>
<i>Opening hours of the pottery workshops</i>	<p>From 8 am to 5 pm. No fixed opening hours, the time indicated reflects the working hours of the potters. It is best to inform the potters the evening before the tour about any upcoming visit.</p> <p>You need to call the Children Pottery School of Tunis if you would like them to prepare tables and chairs for a lunch picnic in the garden.</p> <p>Contact either Evelyne Porret or Mahmoud El Sherif prior to your visit to Tunis. Tel of Mahmoud El Sherif: 010 554 2649.</p>
<i>Entrance and guiding fees</i>	<p>We recommend to pay at least LE 5 per person when taking a local guide/facilitator in the village of Nazla for the visit. This serves to compensate the guide for the time and will allow visitors to take photos and enjoy their visit in a peaceful setting.</p> <p>LE 10 to LE 15 per group for the visit of the local fruit garden in Aboxa</p> <p>No entrance fees are due in Tunis. People do in general spend money to purchase a small souvenir. If the Pottery School is preparing tables and chairs for a lunch picnic and offering tea, pay about LE 5 per person to the person that will be in charge of the garden.</p>

<i>Services available during the trip</i>	<p>Simple sanitation facilities in Nazla and Tunis. A cafeteria and more modern sanitation facilities are under construction in Nazla.</p> <p>A small shop selling soft drinks is existing in Tunis. All pottery workshops can provide tea and small snacks (if reserved in advance).</p> <p>Lunch boxes can be provided by the Auberge du Lac and the Panorama Shakshouk Hotels. You can have lunch in the garden of the Children Pottery School of Tunis.</p>
<i>Permits needed to organize this tours</i>	<p>No permits are needed. A police escort is compulsory. Procedures at the Police checkpoint at the entrance of Fayoum can be speeded up by informing the Fayoum Tourism Police and/or the Fayoum Tourism Authority at least one day prior to any trip. The Police needs to know the itinerary, number and nationality of the visitors.</p>
<i>Do you need professional and qualified guiding services / Want to purchase a package tour?</i>	<p>Guides that have been well trained in Ecotourism activities in Fayoum, can prepare a detailed itinerary and know the area can be obtained through the Community Service Center of the Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Cairo University, Fayoum Branch. Tel: 084 33 776</p> <p>Osama Abdel Naby Mobile: 012 790 2448 Email: semsemamon@hotmail.com</p> <p>Ibrahim Abdel Baset Mobile: 010 542 7679 Email: hemoamon@hotmail.com</p>
<i>Useful contacts</i>	<p>Fayoum Tourism Authority Mahmoud Mustafa, Manager Fayoum Governorate Tel: 084 343 213 / Fax: 084 337 304</p>
<i>Hotels in Fayoum</i>	<p>Auberge du Lac Hotel, Fayoum Tel: 084 572 001/2</p> <p>Panorama Shakhouk Hotel, Shakshouk, Fayoum Tel: 084 830 757</p>
<i>How to obtain more information</i>	<p>Fayoum Ecotourism Project Email: ecotourismfayoum@nsce-inter.com Tel: 02 735 1045 / 737 0673</p>
<i>Suggested readings</i>	<p><i>The Fayoum: History and Guide. Neil Hewison. AUC Press, 2001.</i> The most comprehensive introduction to the cultural, historical, geographical and social background of today's Fayoum.</p>

	<p><i>Egypt's Pocket Guide: The Fayoum and Wadi el Rayan. Alberto Siliotti. AUC Press, 2003.</i> A brandnew pocket guide for visitors that contains on 48 pages a lot of useful information, maps, drawings and photographs.</p>
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