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ON THE FRONTIER: EL KHARGA OASIS

by

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When, after four hours, the bus from Asyut finally trundles into El Kharga, a passenger sighs with relief. After Egypt's barren, heat-stricken western desert, where not even a cactus will grow, the green fields and arching palm trees of El Kharga Oasis soothe the eye and spirit.

The oasis is an archipelago of green islands scattered in a sandy depression 200 kilometers long and between 20 and 50 kilometers wide. Vegetation is thinner here, but the mud-walled houses and peasantry working in the fields remind one of the Nile Valley.

Drive on into the town of El Kharga and find wide avenues, long rows of apartment blocks, busy construction crews, and the looming concrete shells of half-completed buildings. Clearly, a frontier town in motion, building for the future.

But an important element is missing. Where are the people? Even during the morning rush hour, the streets of El Kharga are strangely empty, the new government office buildings unusually quiet.

About 100,000 people live in El Kharga oasis, 40,000 of them in the town itself. Maybe half the town dwellers were born there and live in an old quarter characterized by narrow lanes and mud brick construction. The rest



Tree belts planted at El Kharga to keep back the desert.

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El Kharga town. Above, the new government quarter with a vandalized portrait of former President Anwar El Sadat. Below, the old town.

are government employees living in new government-built concrete block housing who moved to El Kharga, often on temporary assignments, from elsewhere. One senses that their hearts remain elsewhere.

Basuni, a 28-year-old secondary schooteacher, spends six months out of the year working in El Kharga. The rest of the time, he lives with his family in Asyut. Although El Kharga has a cinema, a club, and a few small restaurants, "it's dull," said Basuni. "When you live here a long time, you feel anxious."

"It's not an interesting place," agreed Dr. Samir Ghally Tawdros, 34, a veterinarian with a government-run poultry project. Dr. Tawdros, who hails from El Minya, said he stays in El Kharga only because, "I benefit in my knowledge of poultry breeding here."

The government of Gamel Abdel Nasser had big plans for El Kharga in the early 1960s. It combined this oasis with two others, Dakhla and Farafa, to form the New Valley governorate. Planners envisioned the New Valley as a second home to the country's teeming masses. Clearly, the Nile Valley was becoming overcrowded. Land must be found elsewhere.

The New Valley, headquartered in El Kharga, certainly contained lots of land. With 459,000 square kilometers, it became the largest governorate in the country, taking up 45.8 percent of Egypt's total land area. Unfortunately, only a small fraction was arable.

To attract settlers, the government developed irrigation systems and built some industry in the New Valley. During the late 1970s, it considered plans to dig a canal from Lake Nasser to the oases. The scheme was shelved, and the New Valley project has gone into a holding pattern.

"No new factories are planned," said Abdel Khalig Sultan, director of General Agriculture in El Kharga. "We're going to improve existing ones."

Since dates are the major crop in El Kharga Oasis, the government built its first factory in the town, in 1963, to develop that industry. The facility dries and packs dates for shipment to Cairo. It employs about 100 people and has a production capacity of 1,500 tons of dates a year. The machinery is also used to dry onions, another major oasis crop, producing 50 tons a year.

To support the local handicrafts industry, the government built a combined pottery-making and carpet-weaving factory in 1965. The complex comprises two buildings, one for the potters, and one for the weavers.

Ali Omar Baraka supervises four men in the making of traditional pottery and sculptured figurines of rural Egyptians. The men work the clay using old-fashioned potter's wheels.

The wheel makes a gentle whirring sound as Gharib Mohamed Embariz, one of Baraka's men, shows a visitor how it is



Gharib Mohamed Embariz works at his potter's wheel.

done. He manipulates the device with his feet and skillfully molds the wet clay with his fingers.

In the other building, some 50 women sit at hand looms and weave carpets of natural wool. They decorate their work with oasis scenes and traditional geometric patterns. Several women work at each loom, their nimble fingers flying across the threads. In an adjoining room, several men work at their own separate, individual looms.

The government operates a phosphate mine, known as the Abou Tartour Project, 70 kilometers west of El Kharga. An important phosphate belt extends more than 100 kilometers between El Kharga and Dakhla oases.

Agricultural development in El Kharga Oasis continues. Since the 1960s, the government has spent massive sums providing irrigation systems in the oasis. These consist of deep wells, diesel pumps, and tile-lined water channels. About 360 wells now provide irrigation in the governorate, almost a third of them in El Kharga oasis.

"Every year, 30 new wells are dug in the governorate," said Mr. Sultan.

When the program first began, the government enticed farmers from the Nile Valley to settle in the New Valley by offering them five acres of irrigated land each.

"The majority of farmers here have government land," said Anwar Mohamed Abdel Hafez, director of communications and culture in El Kharga.

"Those who have had their own land for a long time are few."

Mohamed Abbas Ahmed is one of the settlers. A wiry man with short-cropped black hair and a small mustache, Mohamed is found harvesting onions at Nasser Wells, a 500-acre government irrigation project 25 kilometers south of El Kharga town. He said he moved to El Kharga with his wife and two children from the Sohag area 12 years ago.

He likes his new home better than the old "because the land here is good," he said. Mohamed owns three acres at Nasser Wells. He pays the government LE 40 a year for the use of its water and grows ful (broadbeans), onions, wheat, and



El Kharga weaver working with traditional loom. The women said they make only 60 piasters (about 50 cents) a day. The male weavers said they make about \$1 a day. They must receive other benefits.



Mohamed Abbas Ahmed, formerly of the Sohag area in Upper Egypt, harvesting onions at a government irrigation project in El Kharga.

berseem (clover). The berseem is used to feed his two cows and one donkey.

The advent of diesel pumps in the oasis has encouraged the cultivation of fruit trees. Along with dates, local farmers grow oranges, olives, lemons, guavas, and apricots.

But the cost of irrigation is high, imposing limits on the amount of land that can be used. Some wells have to go down 1,000 meters before they reach water and can cost LE 150,000 (about \$125,000) each, said Mr. Sultan.

Poultry projects may offer the best hope for El Kharga's economy. Dr. Tawdros works at a facility known as the Bustan (literally, "Garden") Poultry Project. Rows of barracks-like structures on the grounds house breeding operations for Peking ducks, chickens, and turkeys. Two duck ponds do give the project a garden-like atmosphere. The flocks of plump white birds spend their days swimming lazily in the placid, cool waters.

The oasis location is good for poultry breeding "because an isolated place does not allow the spread of contagious diseases," said Dr. Tawdros. Ducks have been bred at El Kharga since the early 1960s; a new chicken egg facility opened just this year.

Unfortunately for the poultry, El Kharga is not as isolated as it once was. In recent years, the chickens have been struck by the dreaded Newcastle disease, a respiratory infection, causing a 70 percent mortality rate in some flocks



Dr. Samir Ghally Tawdros, veterinarian of the Bustan Poultry Project, looking out over one of the project's two duck ponds.

this year.

"The disease arrived here when people began to come in from other places," said Dr. Tawdros.

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