

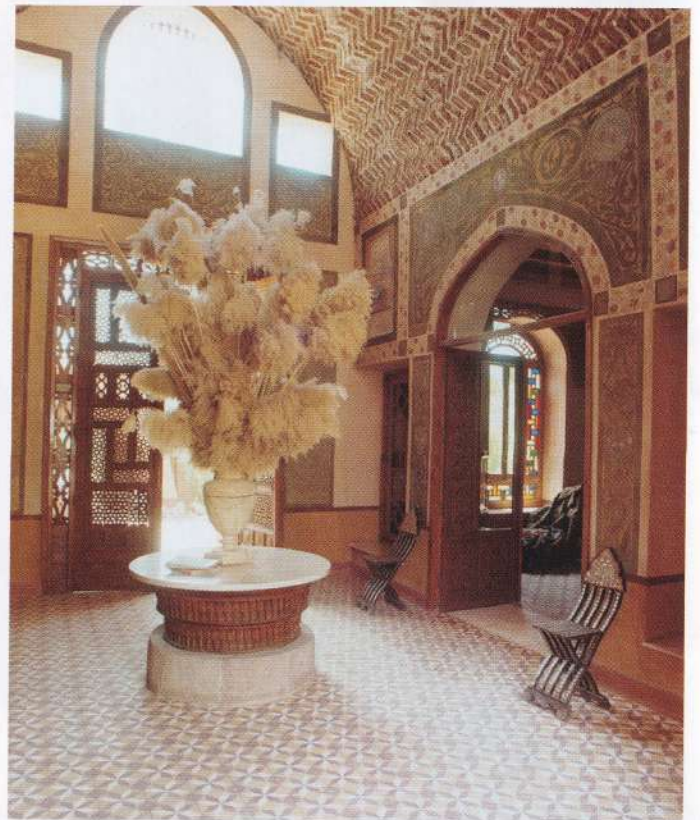
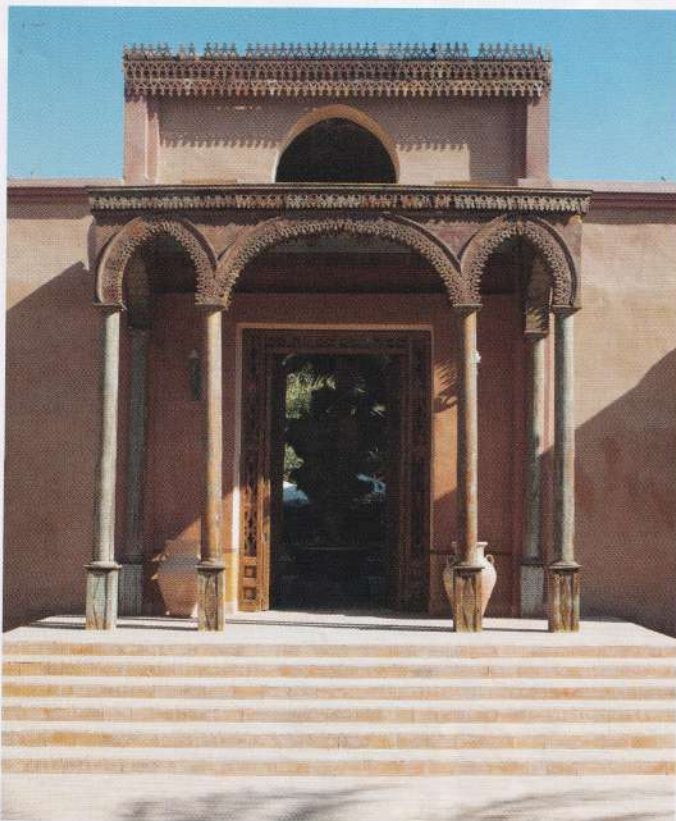
In the lounge bar, the high metal-framed windows with coloured glass insertions are reproduced from old Arabic designs by local artisans. The furniture, mostly early and mid-20th century, was bought at auction in Cairo, while the piano dates from the 1920s and was found in a flea market in Alexandria

# MS ADVENTURE

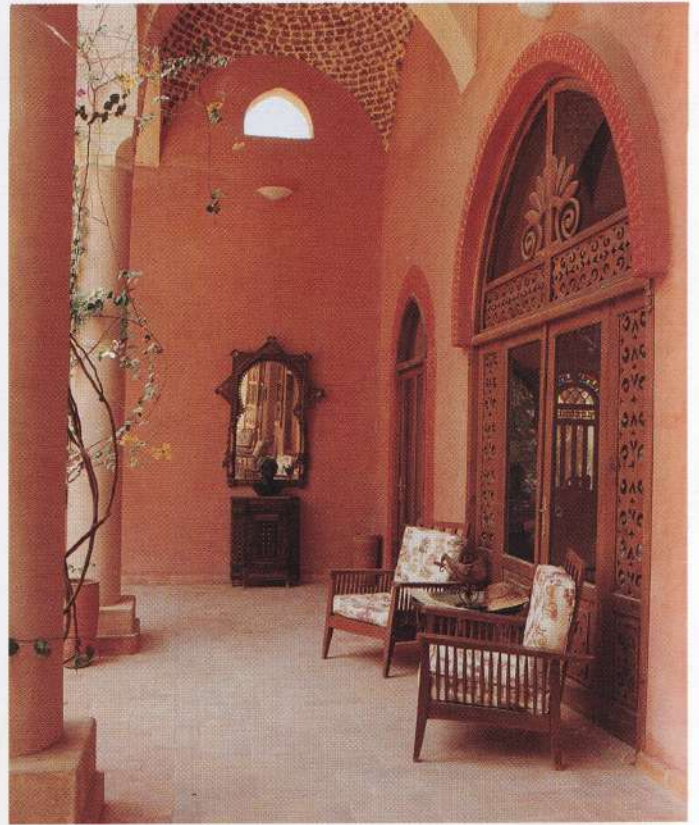
Luxor's Al Moudira Hotel is testament to the spirit of one determined woman. Zeina Aboukheir has travelled wide and far, embracing careers as a jeweller, photographer and restaurateur en route. But it was a romantic stay in Tunis that inspired this storybook building – and saw her becoming the 'lady boss' of a huge construction crew. Marella Caracciolo joins her on the road less travelled. Photography: Tim Beddow







This page, clockwise from top: an antique wooden fretwork screen, or *mashrabiya*, shields guests from the sun and prying eyes; in the reception hall, a marble-topped wooden table supports a pharaonic-style urn made by a local artist; the hotel entrance is framed by a wooden portico salvaged from an old building. Opposite: sunlight dapples through the *mashrabiya* into this shady seating area



This page, clockwise from top: a fountain cools the air in this green and shady oasis; these 1960s French 'Maurice' chairs were bought in Alexandria; built of handmade bricks, this impressive archway demonstrates architect Olivier Sednaoui's virtuosity. Opposite: the curtains and chair covering in the restaurant come from the Cairo fabric shop Tanis, while the floors are tiled with local terracotta





**'AL MOUDIRA'** means 'the lady boss' in Arabic. The Lebanese photographer and entrepreneur Zeina Aboukheir earned this nickname from the 150 or so male builders and craftsmen who – during the three years it took her to transform a field of sand and pebbles on the Nile's west bank near Luxor into her fantasy hotel – complied with her orders. 'My vision,' Aboukheir ponders, 'was stronger than the folly of creating a place from nothing.' Which is why, once it had been completed, she gave the hotel her own imposing nickname. Its 54 gigantic rooms are spread over 40,000sq m of grandly conceived interiors inspired by late 19th-century Orientalism. A maze of arches and domes encloses a series of inner courtyards, each with its own fountain or verdant oasis, and a glamorous swimming pool bordered by huge date palms. Al Moudira Hotel bears testimony to the vision of a singular lady who knows what she wants.

Zeina Aboukheir is a handsome woman with a mane of curly brown hair and a flamboyant sense of style. Her biography testifies to her restlessly cosmopolitan turn of mind. Born and raised in Beirut, she made a name for herself as a portrait photographer. She travelled extensively (and has a perfect command of four languages), married an Italian with whom she has a grown-up daughter, and spent ten years in the Chianti region of Tuscany, restoring an ancient farmhouse. She lived in Rome, divorced, created a line of jewellery and eventually returned to Lebanon, where she opened a restaurant in 1994 on the Green Line between

East and West Beirut. She married again and moved to Cairo before embarking on this Fitzcarraldian adventure in the remoteness of Upper (southern) Egypt. 'My idea of happiness is to bring life to desolate places,' she explains matter-of-factly.

We chat over iced *karkadeh* (hibiscus) tea in the shaded breeze of the hotel's larger inner courtyard, one decorated with 19th-century *mashrabiya*s, wooden architectural ornaments that hang over windows and walls, creating a delicate lace effect. The question seems inevitable: what brought her, a woman with a full life, to this forlorn patch of desert to create a hotel unlike any other in Egypt? She takes a nibble from a sweet cake made with flour, honey and rosewater, brought to us by a member of staff elegantly clad in a uniform of dark-blue trousers and a white jacket. The idea, she begins, dawned on her years ago during a romantic escapade to Tunisia. 'In the mid-1970s, I landed in this tiny hotel in Sidi Bou Saïd, just outside Tunis: seven rooms revolving around one inner courtyard dominated by a huge fig tree. Granted, I was in love, but it was the most romantic place I had ever experienced. I promised myself that I too, one day, would create a unique refuge for people in love, for travellers with a sense of romantic adventure.'

She knew she had found the ideal location for her dream project when she first visited Luxor in the mid-1990s, sailing up and down the Nile in a traditional wooden *felucca* and visiting the city's extraordinary temples and tombs. 'I was blown away by the enthralling mixture of antiquities, culture and natural beauty,' she

Top: Zeina's friend Isabella patiently charted the creation of the hotel in this charming photograph album. Opposite: this wall in the dining room has been adorned with a painting of ancient pharaonic monuments by the Lebanese artist Mario Dahabi. The frame is an old hand-painted one from Syria. The Art Deco windows come from an architectural-salvage emporium in Cairo







recalls. 'Here was a place that could never die or go out of fashion.' As soon as she was granted permission to build near the Valley of the Kings, Aboukheir planted thousands of trees – mostly citrus and date palms – and flowering climbers and shrubs, transforming the arid fields into what is now a luscious garden oasis. For the buildings, she turned to her friend Olivier Sednaoui, an architect she admires because of his knowledge and experience with sun-dried brick structures and his ability to combine traditional building skills with up-to-date sustainable architecture.

'Most of Al Moudira was created out of terracotta bricks made in a local factory,' she says. Sednaoui, who is based in Cairo but has a house near Luxor, elaborated a classic structure that could incorporate much of the architectural salvage that Aboukheir, in anticipation of the project, had spent years amassing during her travels around the Middle East. These include dozens of ancient wooden doors, monumental stained-glass windows, painted ceramic tiles and several *mashrabiyyas*.

Zeina Aboukheir has an eye for spotting, and salvaging, objects most people would pay little attention to. Much of the furniture – velvet-clad chairs from the 1940s, graceful wrought-iron tables, extravagant chandeliers – looks as though it has come straight out of an Agatha Christie movie set. Instead, it was bought for a song in Cairo's dusty old auction houses. The coloured cement floor tiles, a central element of the decoration at Al Moudira Hotel, were created ad hoc in a tiny factory nearby that still had

the original Italian moulds from the 1930s and 1940s. The factory was about to close down before Al Moudira threw it (and several other local industries) a lifeline.

As for the wall decorations, such as the rose-and-red stripes of the bar area, or the more muted ochres in the bedrooms, they were achieved by mixing pigments directly into the fresh plaster to ensure that the hues remained unaltered by the fierce desert sunlight. 'Colour is what I brought back from my experience in Tuscany,' says Aboukheir. A local painter who goes by the nickname Picasso added an oniric quality in every bedroom with his paintings of fantastic mythological creatures.

'It's been fun,' she says, 'and there have been headaches, too.' Despite the anxieties about tourism in Egypt, there seems to be a constant stream of people who come back to Al Moudira year after year in search of peace, quiet, warmth and – most importantly – an extraordinarily intimate experience of the surrounding archaeology, thanks to Aboukheir's network of guides and contacts. The locals, many of whom owe their livelihood to the 'lady boss' and to Al Moudira Hotel, are thriving. 'At the beginning, they would walk to work or ride a donkey. Then they started buying bicycles and mopeds.' The lady boss concludes: 'Many young ones have now married and have children. It's so nice to see how Al Moudira Hotel has brought new life to this area' ■

*Al Moudira Hotel, Hager Al Dabbeya, West Bank, Luxor, Egypt. For more information, ring 00 20 1 223 251 307, or visit [moudira.com](http://moudira.com)*

Top: all 54 rooms at Al Moudira, and their en-suite bathrooms, are enormous. Above the bed in the Pharaonic Room hangs a painted wooden panel created for a TV film about Tutankhamun. Opposite: in the Ottoman Room, a hand-painted dome and trompe-l'oeil curtain by the Lebanese artist Mario Dahabi frame a bed covered with a traditional *suzani* blanket from Uzbekistan

