

Below: the Colossi of Memnon in the Theban Necropolis. Right: the twin bedroom of Villa Casbah Domes, one of the private villas at Al Moudira in Luxor



Ask someone who has stayed at Al Moudira to describe the hotel, and the odds are good that person will eventually deploy the word “oasis”. Unlike so many places across north Africa that lay claim to that descriptor, this one, which opened at the shaggy green edges of Luxor in 2002, merits it entirely and on many levels. First, there is its physical remove from Luxor city – on the Nile’s west bank, away from the bustle and cacophony of river cruisers and tourists. The generosity of its gardens is another: bougainvillea froths over roof edges, hundreds of mature date palms cast skeins of shade, fountains chatter in the cool courtyards of low, rosy-walled pavilions. The food is elegant; the staff ultra-competent. There’s a bar furnished with claw-footed chairs and settees and hung with suzani-like curtains. At night when it’s lit with candles, you half expect to find Lawrence Durrell or Jean Cocteau holding court.

The hotel’s buildings, each organised around a central courtyard, were designed by Olivier Sednaoui, the London-trained Egyptian architect who also designed Christian Louboutin’s house a few miles away. The rooms and suites they hold are enormous. Gilded domed ceilings studded with stained-glass eyes soar 5m high; walls are stencilled in trompe l’oeil muqarnas, decorative motifs and botanical patterns; Nile-green tiles gleam along bathroom walls. The unimpeachable eye for good antiques possessed by Zeina Aboukheir, the woman who built Al Moudira, is in evidence everywhere, whether 17th-century Syrian or 1930s French. The hotel’s most



“The best bones in Egypt”

A legendary Luxor hotel is rebuilding a bygone glamour. By *Maria Shollenbarger*

Photography by *Mark Anthony Fox*



“ZEINA MADE IT A HOME FOR INSPIRING PEOPLE FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD”



striking quality, and still its ultimate selling point, is its pervasive and somehow totally credible atmosphere of bygone-era glamour and the early 20th century.

Aboutkheir, who is Italo-Lebanese, is still an intrinsic part of day-to-day life at the hotel she crafted; but she is no longer its proprietor. In 2022 she sold to a company controlled by Florian Amereller, a Cairo-based lawyer with various business interests across the MENA region, who became captivated by Al Moudira when he booked it out for his wife’s birthday festivities in 2018. “Zeina built this place in the middle of the desert and made it a home for inspiring people from all over the world,” says Amereller. Of his decision to buy it, he says simply: “I thought Al Moudira had the best bones in Egypt.” With the acquisition come plans for further expansion and elaboration, of both the physical premises and the ideas behind them.

Over artichoke pizzas cooked in the wood-fired oven he has just had installed near the pool, he articulates his goals. The proximity to bucket-list archaeological sites – the Valleys of the Kings and Queens, the temples of Seti I and Hatshepsut, and the Tomb of Tutankhamun among them – has always been an obvious part of Al Moudira’s currency. But Amereller believes it has the potential to be the best hotel in the country. Moreover, he wants to make it a destination in its own right, one of those international centres of social gravity that purveys something much more ineffable and alluring than mere accommodation. He’s bullish about attracting a traveller “who has been all over, and for whom luxury is something understated with all the right details”.

The evolution has been assertive and fast-moving, like Amereller himself is. There’s now a new standalone café – Khan Al Moudira, serving oriental cuisine in its own large, umbrella-shaded courtyard – to complement the more continental-leaning fine-dining restaurant and the casual pool pavilion. The food is simple and exactly what you want, the flavours singing from crispy ta’ameya (Egyptian falafel); the bright-green colour comes from fava beans and creamy, garlicky babaghanoush. Next to this is a new events hall for weddings and celebrations; on a floor above, an open-plan co-working space with a large roof terrace – 300sq m of space, in which initially there will only be 10 workstations. It’s intended mostly for a clutch of long-stay “apartments”, which are more like small townhouses, just the other side of the courtyard; but any guest is welcome to use it.

Reaching up from the sea of palms in the garden is a striking, foursquare new structure with an octagonal cupola and a Jantar Mantar-like immutability – a library “tower”, in which Amereller plans to install around 7,000 books from his own extensive collection: architecture, archaeology, food, fiction and first editions of Baedeker’s *Egypt*, published in English in 1898.

Most significant, though, are several new villas integrated into the edges of the property – the ticket, Amereller feels, to that “best hotel in Egypt” mandate (there are Red Sea hotels offering private villa accommodation; but none, he says, that showcases antiques and craft, and is its own standalone, fully staffed hospitality proposition, with all the hotel’s amenities and facilities to boot). At Al Moudira these range from two-bedroom bungalows nestled in their own gardens, to family-style “lofts” with 150sq m living rooms, 7m ceilings and tall Crittall-style windows enclosed in mashrabiyyas, to rambling compounds whose four or five bedrooms are distributed among small buildings surrounding a large pool.



Far left: the private pool of Villa Casbah Domes. Top centre: pigeon towers on Al Moudira’s farm. Top right: handpainted frescoes in the Ottoman Hall restaurant. Above: reclaimed tiles in a bedroom in Villa Nubia



Frescoes on the walls of Villa Nubia's salon



ENTIRE PALACES' WORTH OF SALVAGE HAVE GONE INTO THE NEW VILLAS

Amereller has asked Aboukheir to stay on indefinitely in a consulting-advisory role. While he exudes conviction in his ideas, he's collaborative about process, conferring with (and sometimes deferring to) her on aesthetic decisions. "It was very important to me to carry on working on the project with Zeina, to maintain her spirit and also rely on her understanding of the place," Amereller tells me. "We laugh about it now, but let's just say she was a little sceptical at the beginning when we started some of the works."

While you get the feeling that, behind her sphinx's smile, Aboukheir might take a view on lofts and co-working spaces, the two share an obvious reverence for beautiful old buildings and their

things. "All of this should not look new and manicured; this is why we used traditional building techniques," Amereller says. He has amassed warehouses full of furniture in Cairo, and bought up entire palaces' worth of salvage – marble, tiles, timber, joinery – in Alexandria and elsewhere in Egypt. Much of it went straight into the new structures, particularly the villas: "It immediately imbues the place with soul." From the local sandstone bricks to the layers of decorative painting, four-poster beds copied faithfully from 19th-century ones, and old marble from Alexandria cladding the pools, Amereller says guests tell him they "can't believe" what's new has only been there for two years.

Just the other side of Al Moudira's long western wall, where the desert stretches toward the Theban Mountain, Amereller's Stage Two project is taking shape: a self-sustaining farm and collection of makers' workshops on a large parcel of land Al Moudira acquired last year. Here, space for carpenters and upholsterers is already in use; by 2025, there will be weavers, paper-makers and a tailor, all in quarters subsidised by the hotel.



Some of the remaining acreage is allocated to solar power; Amereller's goal is to have the hotel running on 100 per cent renewable energy within another two years. Across much of the rest of it, kitchen gardens have been mapped and planted, adjacent to a small olive grove put in by Aboukheir years ago; along their edges there are now stalls for goats and cows (they provide the milk for the mozzarella and ricotta on those artichoke pizzas) as well as huge hutches full of hens, quail and ducks.

As we meander between tractors and nattering poultry birds, a baby donkey trailing hopefully behind us, Amereller expounds on his self-sufficiency master plan – an eventual 12 artisan workshops, updated staff accommodations and a tea and coffee kiosk for the drivers who ferry them to and from the archaeological sites, more diverse farm animals, and special residencies for the academics who come to Luxor. He wants to create "the cocooning feeling of being in a village", he says, "with flocks of animals crossing and a strong element of local farmers in our hotel".

Back on the other side of the wall, the fountains burble and the jazz plays. Women in long, white aprons navigate garden paths holding huge trays of fresh bread aloft, its enticing odour trailing like incense in the air. Gardeners can be seen amid the greenery, pruning the understory of new palms and tamarisks.

Aboukheir shows me a well-foxed scrapbook that was made for her by an old friend. Its title: *Al Moudira, ou La Folie de Zeina* – "Zeina's mad idea". "Because the locals thought I was a bit, you know..." she says with a wry smile, momentarily crossing her eyes and wiggling her fingers in front of them in a parody of bonkers-ness. Flipping through the first pages, with their images of the bleached and unpromising stretch of desert where she broke ground 20 years ago, you understand why a few sceptics numbered among the neighbours. Look up and around, and you understand her satisfaction – and Amereller's investment. The Al Moudira story is now a *folie à deux*. ■ **HTSI**
Rooms from \$300, villas from \$2,000; moudira.com

Top left: the villa's private library. Top: a domed seating area by Villa Nubia's pool. Right: antique tables that Amereller had repurposed as sinks. Far right: a farmer's son holds a two-day-old goat

