



Bringing a family to Alexandria

It may seem very daunting uprooting a young family to move house, let alone moving a continent. We did it in August 2007. A few months down the line, with the children and husband (!) settled, it is still possible to write objectively about life here in Alexandria, which perhaps would be a little more difficult for people who have been established for a long period. It is remarkable how quickly you become acclimatized to what are, at first, huge changes in life-style.

For a family used to living in 'child-friendly' cities, where there are plenty of things (zoo's, garden centres, children's museums etc.) to keep children amused, Alexandria can seem difficult. There is nothing really set up especially for children, and when you haven't even got the option of going to Granny or Grandad's to play – it can be hard. In Alexandria, there are a couple of open air sports centres with playgrounds etc., but not many families are to be found staying in the city at the weekend, especially when it's hot.

It has to be said that the climate is a huge plus for a young family. Up until the end of October, we were taking our children to the beach (about 40 minutes away) and being able to bathe. As there are no accessible beaches in Alexandria, it is necessary to do a little travelling, but no more than a couple of hours in the car for the really superb ones, like you see in travel agents windows. Only a few very established families have their own cars. Most families seem to get together and hire cheap minibuses to enjoy days out, which cuts out the stress of any marital map-reading arguments! Although some people may miss driving, we as a family enjoy not having the worry and expense of a car. Although the traffic here is horrendous and taking yellow taxi's can be quite stressful, there are reliable taxi firms which will have seat belts to hold car seats etc. We have found the joys of getting around the city on trams. They are safe, relatively clean, reliable and the children love them! Now 'winter' is upon us (I use the term loosely) we take the children out on at least one trip on a tram at the weekend. There will either be something to see, or a hot chocolate in an interesting café, or even a meal in a very reasonably priced restaurant – which is great when you're paying for a family. Although Egyptian culture may not be 'child-centred' as such, they love children and spoil them rotten. Many times our children are given sweets by strangers – and although at home this is obviously not to be encouraged, here it is an extremely genuine gesture from a culture which adores children.

The big advantage of being part of ex-pat community is having other children and parents who are in the same situation. This means there are always people just around the corner who are eager to meet up and get the children together. The area of Roushdy, where everyone lives is leafy and relatively calm so that you can escape the madness of down-town Alex. There is of course, the call to prayer which seems so intrusive at first. My children were frightened at first, as the call to prayer at 5:00 in the morning can be a shock, but they were sleeping through it within the first fortnight. Families with slightly older children might enjoy going to Cairo for the day – completely feasible as the train takes two and a half

hours. Even a night in a hotel will not break the bank. Although it seems that prices have gone up in recent years, hotels do seem very amenable in putting extra beds in rooms, so a family of four can sleep in one bedroom.

The fact that domestic help here is cheap and an accepted part of ex-pat life, takes an enormous strain off the day to day stresses of having a family. If your children have just emptied their toy box on the floor for the fourth time that day, the thought that yes, you could actually leave it for somebody else is very nice. On a personal level, I have found that even working full-time, I get more quality time with my children as I spend so much less time on housework. Other things which can make a difference to your children's lives are such things as sports lessons, piano lessons and such-like which are also very reasonably priced.

Shopping here is very limited. If you or your family like the latest fashions, gadgets and shopping in general, then Alexandria will be a disappointment. There are toy shops and children clothes stores, but baby/toddler equipment is limited and educational or wooden toys are nearly impossible to find. Better to think ahead, and bring stuff from home.

Talking from a very broad perspective, we are delighted that our children are having an experience of other than a western culture. We feel that they will benefit enormously from experiencing a totally different culture and building a tolerance of other religions and way of life. In Alexandria, more so than perhaps other cities in the Middle East, it seems totally normal for educated people to speak at least three or four languages. In being a bi-lingual family we have always been in a minority. Here it seems we are in the majority. Living here, just on a day to day basis, children are exposed to at least three languages – and that's not just in school.

Sara, FS/KS1 Leader and Year 1 teacher, with two small children and a non-working spouse