

SPECIAL REPORT EGYPT

Golf courses and gondolas: Cairo's new surroundings



Mirage City: Cairo's new model neighbourhood

ALFI Francis lives in a nice detached villa in Shorouk City, east of Cairo. He decided to buy it last year after returning home from Dubai, where he had worked for 15 years with a leading multinational. The other option would have been a rented flat in a crowded area of Heliopolis, where he was brought up. The villa worked out cheaper, and Francis says he can still get to work in central Cairo in 30-40 minutes. His two children go to a newly-opened private school only a few miles from Shorouk. The only problem is that Francis has no neighbours.

"Most of these villas have been bought, but people don't seem to want to move out of Cairo just yet," he says. "A woman was looking at one villa down the road the other day, and she told me she had bought it for her daughter — aged 12."

Shorouk is one of the more advanced of the massive new upmarket residential schemes sprouting up around Cairo, most of them adorned with championship golf courses. Nearby are New Heliopolis, Qattamiya Heights, Rihab and Mirage City. On the other side of Cairo, the biggest developments are Dreamland and Beverley Hills, both well under way, and to the northwest is the Salmaniya golf complex, boasting no fewer than 90 holes.

The developers of these vast new suburban idylls are conducting lavish marketing cam-

paigns aimed at attracting the well-heeled new middle class to their neighbourhoods. Estimates of how much has been invested in these new projects range up to £E 100,000 million (\$29,325 million).

One of the more exclusive is Mirage City, handily situated near a junction of the Cairo ring road and a highway running from Heliopolis and the airport to link up with the main road to Suez. This development is a relatively modest 400 acres, replete with an 18-hole golf course and five-star hotel.

The 350-room hotel is being built by a joint venture of Athens-based Consolidated Contractors International Company (CCC) and the local Orascom Construction Industries for \$38.5 million, one of the largest individual contracts let for work on one of these developments. It is to be managed by Marriott Lodging of the US and is due for completion towards the end of 2000.

The hotel was originally designed to incorporate a shopping mall. However, the developers are said to have been concerned about plans by UAE-based Majed al-Futtaim group to build a large mall nearby, and they changed the designs. Much of the area desig-



CCC/Orascom are building the Marriott Mirage Hotel

nated for the mall is now to be taken up with a health spa.

The principal investor is Mounir Ghabbour, a leading local business figure with interests in vehicles and tourism. The long-fronted six-floor hotel is on a ridge overlooking an aqua park and the golf course. Studded around the development are the 250 villas being built in the first phase, with price tags ranging from just over £E 1 million (\$295,000) to £E 2.4 million (\$700,000). According to the Mirage City marketing team, 80 per cent of the villas have already been sold. At the far end of the development a second phase is planned. It is to be called New Venice, and will be built around a system of canals, replete with gondolas. A section will be devoted to olive trees so that New Venice will be able to produce its own olive oil.

The big selling point for Mirage City and most of the other developments is the easy access to the new network of highways surrounding Cairo and linking them to the city centre. Coming off the ring road from the east, drivers can now pick up the 6 October flyover which takes them from Nasr City, near the airport, all the way to Mohandeseen on the west bank of the Nile. The flyover was formally opened in September. The developments to the west of the city are served by another highway, the extension of 26 July Street, which was opened earlier this year.

All that is needed is for enough of the Cairo middle class to uproot themselves from their city apartments and populate the new neighbourhoods, rather than speculate on what by now are rapidly falling land values.



Road connections could be the key to the new developments' success