

theguardian

Guardian Features Pages

Diversions: Caning it in Cairo

433 words

9 December 2004

[The Guardian](#)

GRDN

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English

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Dance music might be dead and buried in the UK, but in Egypt the party is only just getting started. In the darkness on the edge of the desert, away from Cairo's hubbub, you can't usually hear anything at night except the crickets. But once every few weeks, scores of SUVs start appearing, winding down unlit dirt tracks, which by day only see donkeys and the occasional fellaheen.

With no road signs or streetlights, the villa can be hard to find, until you get close enough to hear the thumping house music. Then, once you are in the door, past the beefy private security, Egypt seems a world away. Men and women dressed as if they are at the Ministry of Sound openly dance, drink and take drugs together. Cairo's glitterati are ready to party.

Ayman and Mohammad are Egyptian rave organisers. Every month they throw western-style underground parties, advertised through word of mouth, on the outskirts of town. Last month 900 people showed up.

"For years there was no scene in Cairo, only people drinking in underground bars, leaving three bottles on the table to show how much they had drunk - very macho," says Ayman, 33. "Then when I came back to Cairo from San Francisco in 1999, I found Es had started arriving from Europe and Sharm al Sheikh had go-go dancers!"

Now the pair have 400 people on their email list, and they are one of about 10 underground party outfits in Cairo. They make contact through email, by telephone, or more usually, face to face by personal invitation. You need to have at least three personal recommendations to be added to the list, which is why the crowd remains 98% Egyptian.

Since there are no official security companies in Egypt, the doormen are provided by Ayman's friend Turbo and 15 of his mates. The booze comes from the black market and, naturally, everything is cash in hand. Keeping it underground is vital. In the past 10 years Islam has exerted an ever greater pull on Egypt's youth: a growing number of women wear headscarves - formerly a rarity - and fewer young Egyptians can be found drinking alcohol in bars. Cairo's underground scene has had to adapt to survive. "We target people who want to have a good time and cannot have a good time any other way in this country," says Mohammed. "We are Egyptians but we feel like foreigners here in our own country. It is a question of mentality." Hugh Miles

Guardian Newspapers Limited

Document GRDN000020041208e0c9000dk

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