

LAND OF A GREAT

Christina Schulthoff soaks in the sights of Egypt and comes back breathless, awed by its history

I stood on the banks of the Nile, taking in this source of life that gave birth to one of the greatest civilisations on earth. It makes for a fantastic landscape, with a strip of luscious green fields, palms and banana trees flanking the river and a rugged desert and mountain backdrop where the Nile's invigorating irrigation doesn't reach.

Then my contemplations about how many people may have stood in exactly the same spot and enjoyed exactly the same view in the past were rudely interrupted. "Ey Heidi! Heidi Klum! Postkarten, Skarabäus, alles gratis! Alles wie bei Aldi!" This is German for "Hey Heidi! Postcards, scarab beetle, everything for free! Just as at Aldi [a German discount grocery chain]!"

Familiar ground

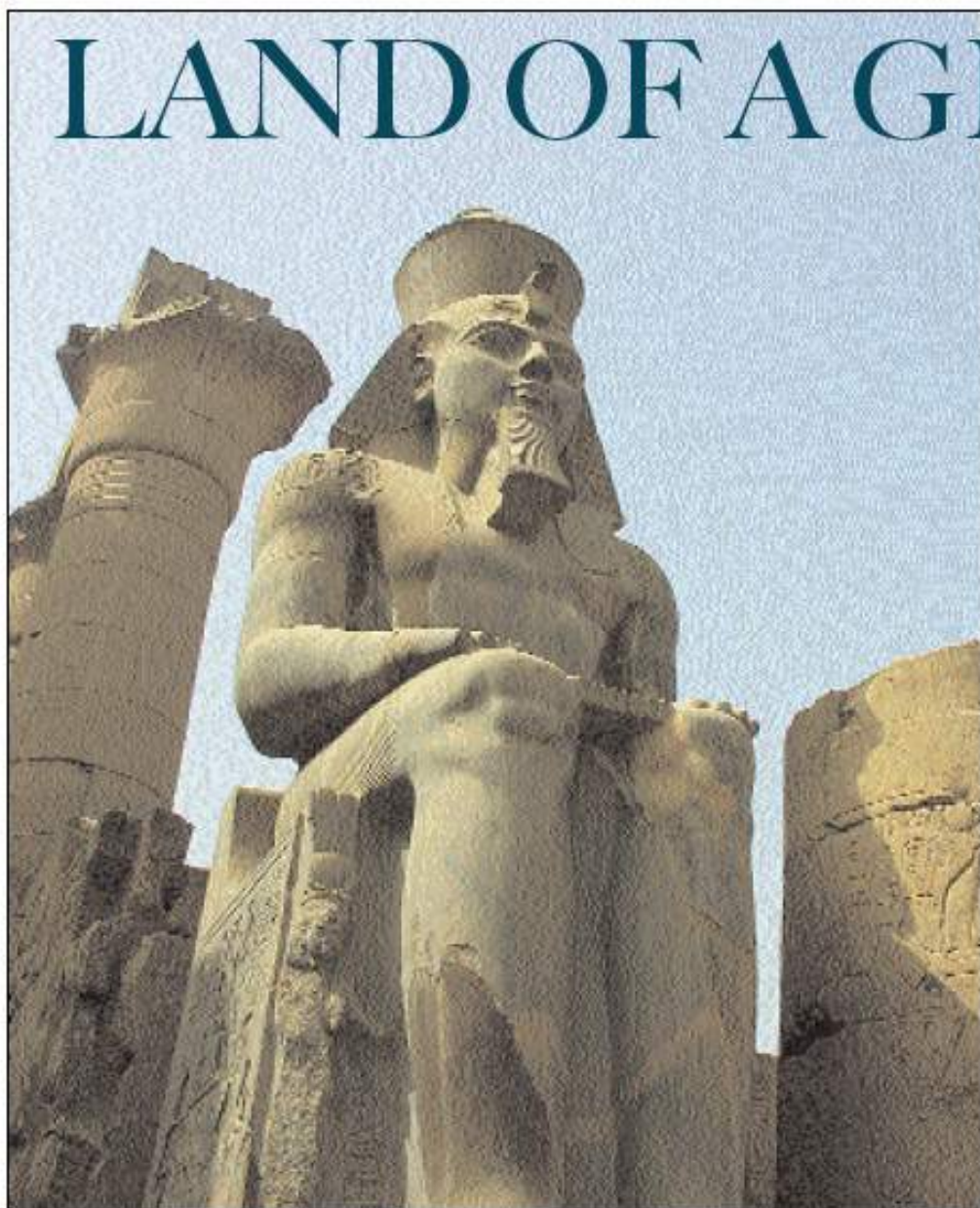
I would learn quickly that in Egypt, you don't have to open your mouth. The hawkler will take one look at you and know with unfailing accuracy where you are from. He will then praise his goods fluently in whichever language is appropriate. Yes, there is a lot to be sold and a lot of bakshish to change hands in the Land of the Pharaohs.

Springtime is busy in Egypt. Millions of tourists flock to the country to take in its temples, cities, beaches and culture before the scorching summer sun turns such exciting excursions into unbearable undertakings.

Tour operators

Luckily for the inexperienced visitor, hundreds of international tour companies have specialised in compressing Egypt's vast array of must-sees into tidy, convenient one-, two- or three-week packages. So wherever you go, you will find Egyptian tour guides leading their herds through the sites, showering historical information upon them in German, English, Dutch, Russian, Japanese, Spanish, French and probably a dozen other languages.

"I feel that I am fulfilling a very important task," Hamdy, a German-speaking guide, told me. "I have the opportunity to mediate between cultures and to bring people from



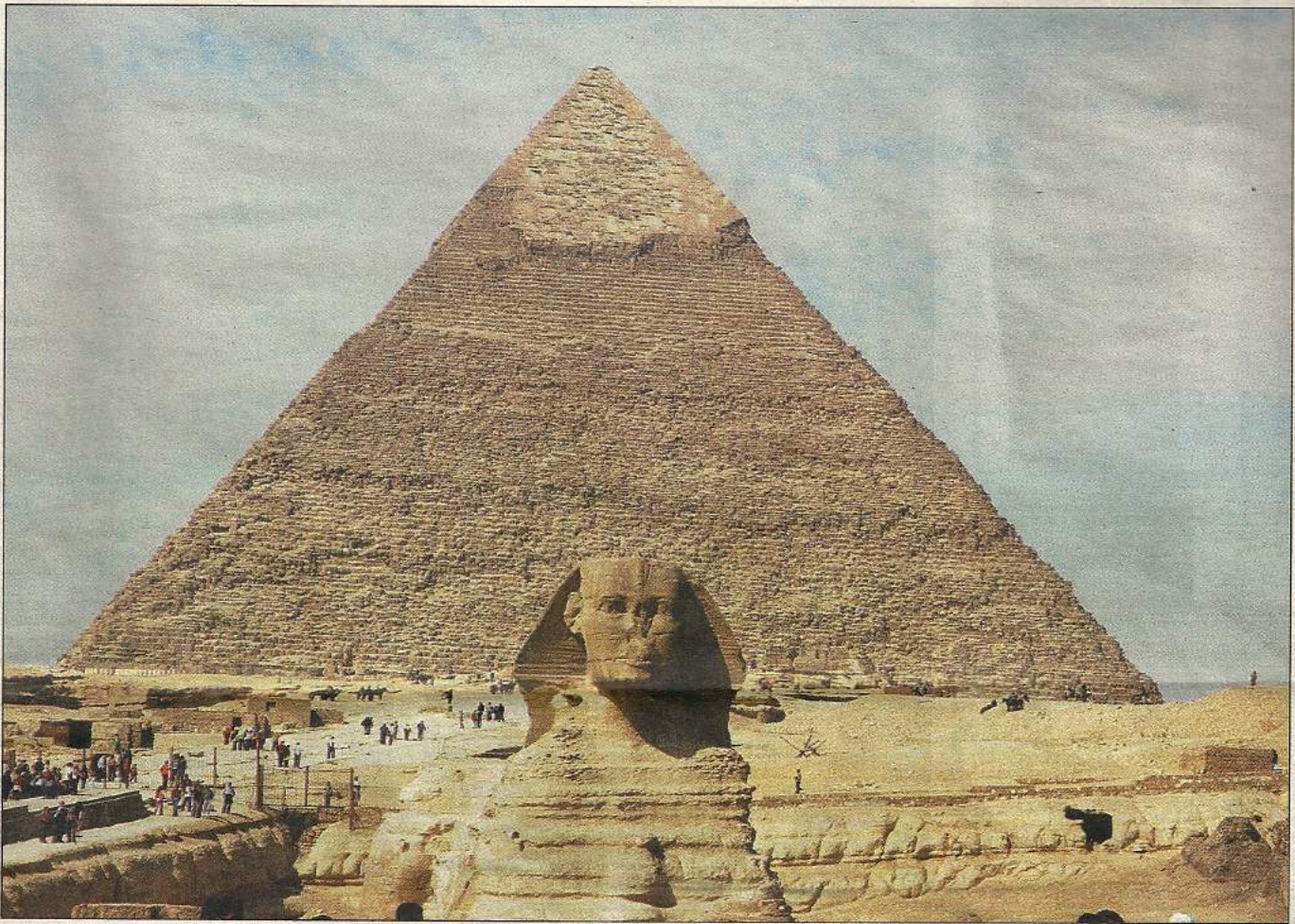
Photos by CHRIS TBA, SCHULTHOFF/Gulf News

Above: Ramses II statue at Luxor Temple. The Luxor Temple was mostly built by the pharaoh Amenhotep III in Thebes, as modern-day Luxor was known in ancient times. It is dedicated to the Theban Triad and was expanded by Tutankhamun, Ramses II and Alexander the Great over the following centuries.

Right: Face of the Ramses II statue at the Memphis Museum. Even today, thousands of years after his reign during the 19th Dynasty (around 1293 BC to around 1185 BC), a vast array of Ramses II statues survive. The palaces and monuments he built have ensured his place in history as Egypt's most famous pharaoh.



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Left: Giza
Pyramid, Egypt. It
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both sides closer together." Although Egypt has managed to keep its tourist arrivals growing, the industry has been shaken by such events as 9/11 and the 2005 bombings in Sharm El Sheikh. Its people have become acutely aware of how important cultural exchange and mutual understanding is.

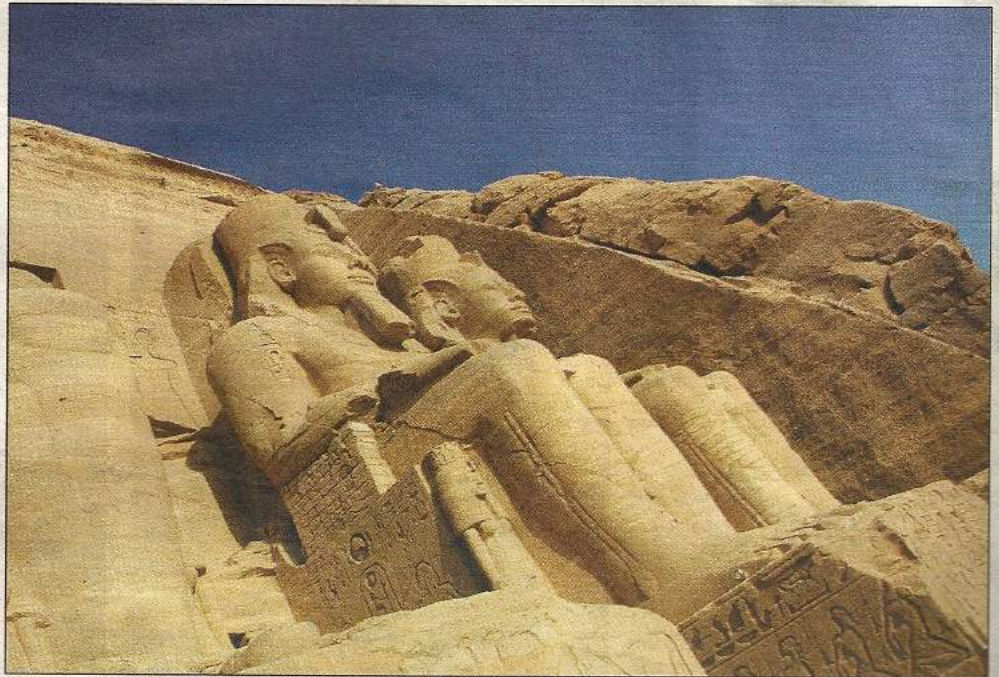
The complete Egypt menu usually includes a cruise on the Nile in Upper Egypt, where tourists will visit the Valley of the Kings, nature sanctuaries and dozens of temples from Karnak to Abu Simbel.

Places to visit

This is followed by a few days in Cairo, with visits to the pyramids and the Sphinx at Giza, the Egyptian Museum, ancient mosques and churches and buzzing Khan Al Khalili bazaar. Here, as in any Egyptian bazaar, tourists must brace themselves against the flood of salesmen who yell at them while frantically waving trinkets in front of their faces. During our visit, one shopkeeper contemplatively regarded my father before asking: "And how can I take your money?"

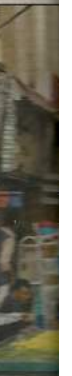
To recover from this excruciating two-week regimen of sightseeing, tourists are treated to a bit of beach holidaying during the final leg of

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Great Temple at Abu Simbel. This temple was carved out of the mountainside under Ramses II, Egypt's most famous pharaoh. Each of the majestic colossal statue of Ramses is 20 metres tall. The temples at Abu Simbel, in an international collaboration, were moved in the 1960s to escape the rising waters of Lake Nasser.

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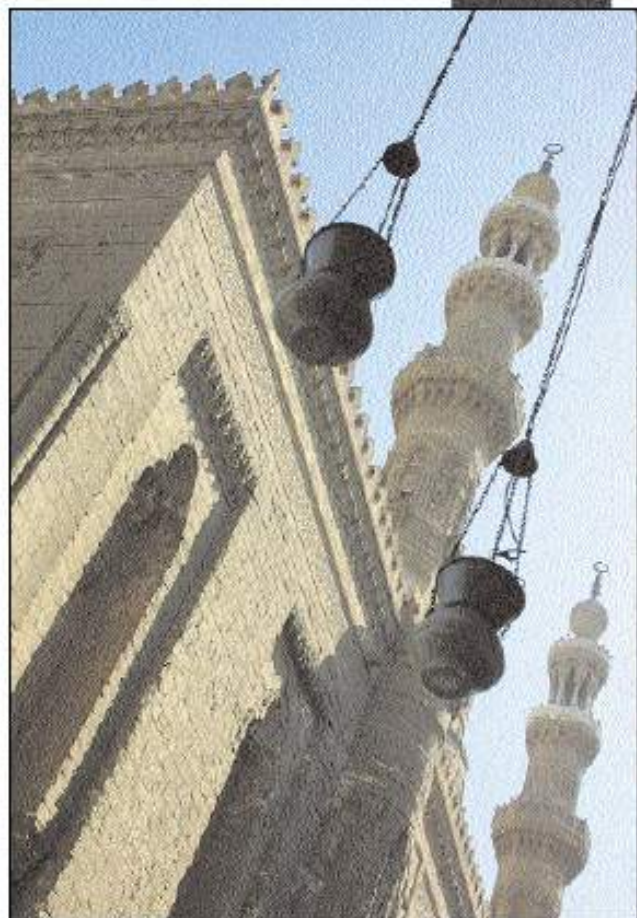
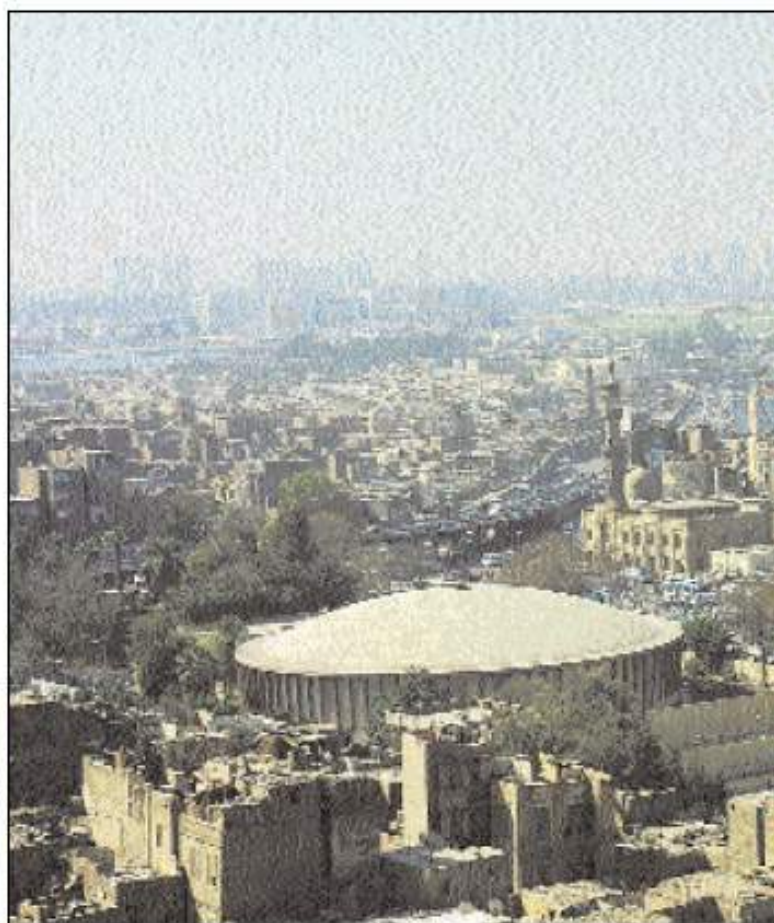
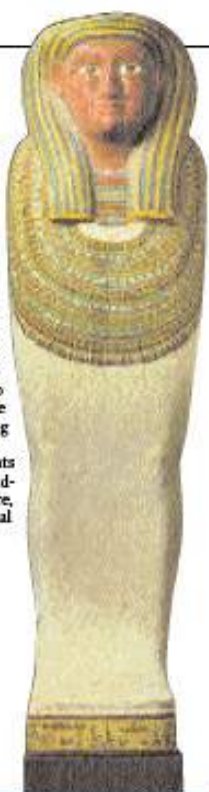


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their trip. The Red Sea resorts of Sharm El Sheikh and Hurghada are favoured destinations for diving, tanning and relaxing.

Though the thousands of years of history you race through at a dizzying pace may leave you breathless at times, such an action-packed visit to Egypt can nevertheless also leave you feeling richer. Smoking a shisha along with the hundreds of locals who have perfected the tradition into an art form, or sipping a quiet cup of anisette tea while watching the sun rise over the Nile is a satisfying way to connect with the land.

With its collection of human feats of architecture, breathtaking landscapes and a rich Arab culture, Egypt manages to find a special place in many a visitor's heart.



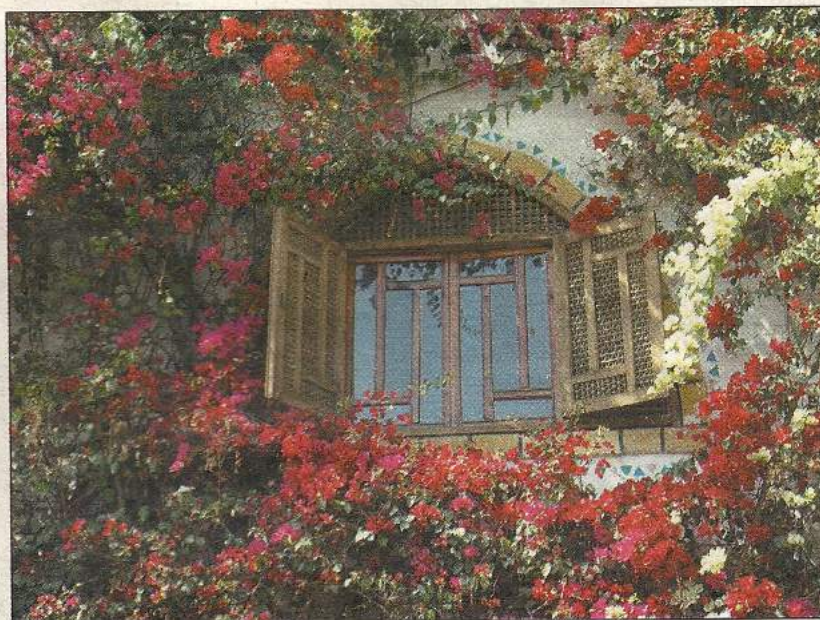
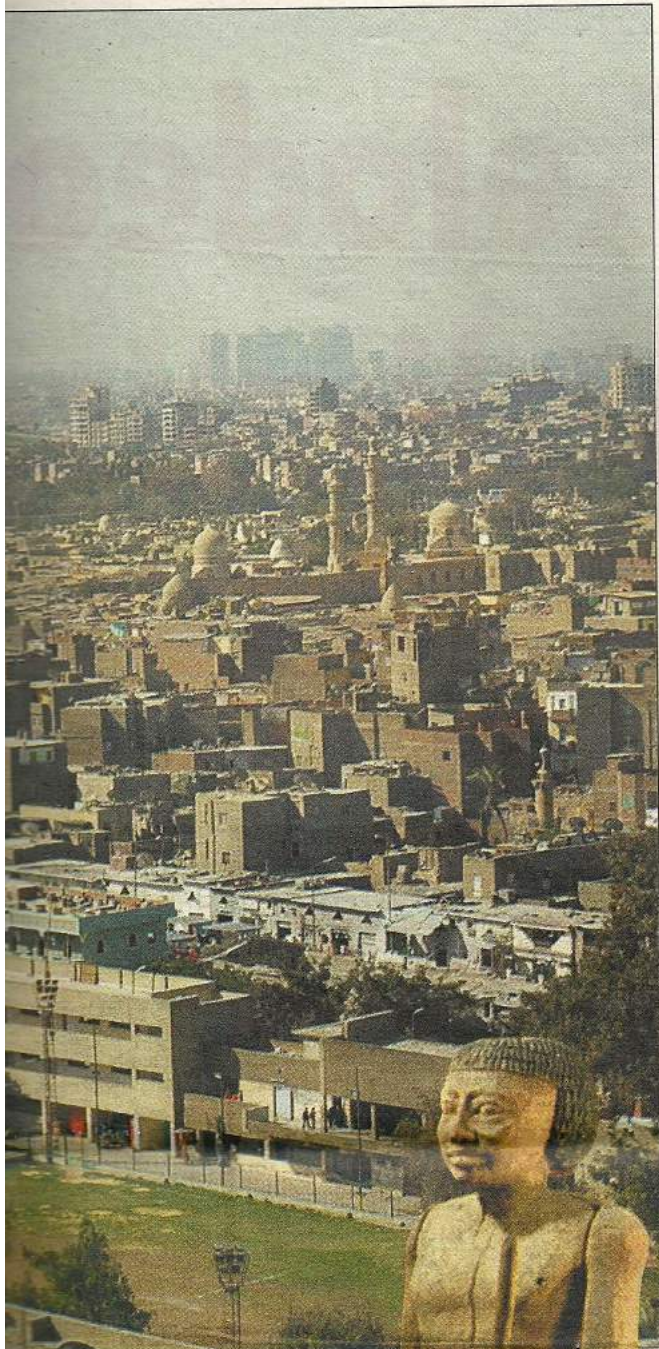
Above: A door inside the Sultan Hassan Mosque in Cairo. The building was constructed as a mosque and religious school in 1256 AD for Sultan Hassan Bin Mohammad Bin Qalawun. It is said to be the most unified and compact historic structure stylistically in Cairo.

Left: The Sultan Hassan Mosque



Below: Luxor Temple's majestic entrance with its boulevard of Sphinxes.

Left: A view of Cairo from a terrace at the Citadel.



A window at a restaurant near the pyramids in Giza. Close to the shores of the Nile, Egypt boasts greenery and flora aplenty. But just a couple of kilometres away from the life-giving river, the terrain turns into desert.

by CHRISTINA SCHULTHOFF/Gulf News

