



# Seedy celebration

FRED HARRISON visited Egypt. It was supposed to be an air-conditioned bus ride through the desert to view the glories of a celebrated civilisation. Instead, it turned into a tutorial on modern economic history provided by an astute tourist guide.

ALEXANDRIA. Dante's inferno: the seaport built by Ancient Greeks is a nightmare of dirt and decay, crumbling roads, people swarming like maggots over piles of rotting matter that are apartments and sweatshops.

Nasser's socialist revolution led to rent controls in 1954. This stopped private sector construction of accommodation for rent. The government tried to offset this effect with public housing. But the damage was done: the privatisation of socially-created rental values, coupled with an inadequate construction program.

Shrewd tenants who pocketed what they saved on rent are now building their own homes and selling the leases on their rent-controlled apartments for high premiums!

Bedouins succumbed to the sedentary life, and settled on the fringe of the city. Some still have tents staked out in their yards. Wanderers they may have been, but they know a thing or two about location, location and location. Their land was needed on which to build factories for the jobless. They resisted until the price went sky-high. Now many of them are rich. But Alexandria still does not have enough factories.

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UNDER King Farouk, 5% of the population owned 95% of the nation's wealth, principally agricultural land. Nasser, not knowing better, built socialism on sand.

For example, he settled for the simplistic form of land reform: the allocation of a few acres to the



● Pharaohs' pyramids at Giza. Today's mortals have inherited a much-less substantial kingdom with a highly problematical future.

landless peasants, and an upper limit of 50 acres for those who already owned property. The inevitable happened: production slumped.

Anwar Sadat opened the door to private capital, and sought salvation in a mixed economy. Muslim fundamentalists were not impressed: they shot him.

Until the Third Oil Crisis erupted last year the main export was people to the Gulf States. Their remittances kept Egypt solvent — just — but the money is now drying up. No shortage of people, though: the population of 50m is increasing at the rate of 1m every nine months.

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CAIRO: Pyramids, where the police keep watch on the beggars. A camel ride for the tourists, every one of them Lawrence of Arabia. Homage to Tutankhamun.

The Pharaohs built homes of mud and sand, for life on earth was but a mere fleeting visit. Their tombs, however, were of stone, built on the west side of the Nile, facing the sun which sank beneath the ground, passed through a tunnel and was resurrected in the east.

Mortals are now buried in a cemetery called The City of the Dead. But the living compete for space with the dead. Because of the housing shortage, the homeless have occupied the cemetery: TV antennae atop the buildings, satellite images to blur the reality of a bankrupt nation.

It is difficult to know if the religious Right will usurp the soft-centred socialists. Will the mullahs give us a re-run of the Iranian revolution? The seeds of political discontent have been planted, which is more than can be said about the country's ability to feed itself: it now has to import over half its food, and prime agricultural land is being swallowed up at an estimated 1% a year by builders who ignore the fact that only 5% of the country's area is suitable for cultivation. And President Mubarak knows that his political flirtation with Israel provides the malcontents with a ready-made excuse.

It would have been different, if the colonels who sent a crooked king into exile in 1952 had instituted a real land reform — the kind that could have transformed Egypt into a civilisation that was proud of its present and did not have to rely on a gold-plated past for its self-esteem.