Ras el Bar, my vacations' paradise

As far back as I remember, our summer vacations were spent in Ras el Bar. How to describe so many years of fun and family outings? I can only recall tidbits brought to mind by familiar aromas, sounds, images of gone dear ones, sporadic names picked up here or there. Sometimes even the light of a sunset can generate far forgotten memories.

So here we are with the few things I remember.

Every year, at the end of spring Moussa would start making the rounds, visiting his clients, making contracts to rebuild a hut in Ras el Bar. I say rebuild, because at the time the Aswan Dam was not built yet and the Nile grew heavy at the beginning of fall flooding the Delta and Ras el Bar with rich silt.

So by the time school was over, all the families would drive from Cairo to Ras el Bas. It was an all night trip and I remember sleeping all the way.

I remember the white wooden stairs and the ramp leading to the hut. They were always damp and sandy. The furniture was far from fancy but it spoke of holidays and family fun. We always shared our hut with our maternal grandparents.

There were no streets, only sandy paths and in those days we walked a lot. Once in a while we would take the taftaf if we needed to go far.

We would swim everyday at the beach, but once in a while we would picnic with other families at the Guerba; for that we would ride the felucca across the river and spend the day on the

shore of the Nile. Fishermen would bring in their catch and a makeshift pit would be constructed and the delicious fish would be cooked and eaten right away.

Every morning I would be awaken by street vendors crying loud: samak, caborya, lokoumadis, foul we taameyya, gambary , etc.(fish, crab, Greek sweet meal, fava bean and falafel, shrimps).

Actually only lokoumadis would yank me out of bed.

Our life was lazy during the summer. Breakfast was generous and abundant. There was always, and I mean always home-made cheese and jams at the table. We would eat foul or eggs or fried cheese, all this with eish balady.

The kids were always impatient to go in the sea, but for some strange reason that I understood as I grew older, parents would delay swimming to at least one hour after breakfast.

We would grab our tin pails and utensils and our towels and would run, faster that the servants that carried the umbrella and the folding chairs. As soon as we reached the water, we dipped our feet to cool down the burn from the hot sand, and then we started to play, building sand castles, burying our legs in saucy wet sand, and when we were hot and sticky, we would run into the sea and splash around for a few hours or until our parents or the servant called us for lunch.

Ah! The good old days of our youth! Lunch was usually taken at the hut. After that, the adults would take a nap, while others played tric-trac (backgammon).

Around three in the afternoon, the Groppi guy would be calling "Gelati, stick". He carried a kaki duffle bag with some kind of insulation on his back, and sold these delicious jewels from heaven. Chocolate stick had a red wrapper and vanilla had a golden one. Then came the Dondorma kaymak vendor with the Turkish style caramelized ice cream, he just called "Kaymak, kaymak", and we understood.

Ahmad, the faithful servant would then prepare Turkish coffee and serve the halaweyyat (the sweets), while we children would play outside the hut.

At times, we would go in groups to the Leyssan (the tongue 'don't ask'). It was that stretch of land that extended out in the sea and was difficult to walk on as the waves would make it slippery.

At times we would go to the Foyer for drinks and appetizers and at other times we would walk to the river bank to do some shopping. There wasn't much to buy except some strict necessities.

All this delightful time disappeared after 1956. Egypt was no longer the same and we lived with a gnawing stress.

Summer vacations were spent in town, at the Sporting Club and sporadically I would be sent to spend a couple of weeks with this or that aunt in Alexandria, but it was not the same.