

Tarek Swelim:

When is a tour not a tour? When the
guide is right

Guiding passions

Profile by **Yasmine El-Rashidi**

(photos: Ayman Ibrahim)



First impressions are not my specialty, as an initial meeting with a gentleman by the name of Tarek Swelim made clear.

"He got his PhD from Harvard," the whispers went. "They offered him a full scholarship. And he was only 30. He's fascinating."

Yet apart from striking brown eyes, and a rather raucous laugh, he seemed ordinary enough; bright -- a brain, maybe -- but boring.

It was an impression that was promptly laid to rest, however, when Swelim opened his mouth and began to talk.

"Being unique," he began, "being different, was always appealing to me."

He grew up, he explained, amid Ancient Egypt: "My father is an archaeologist, Egyptologist, pyramidologist -- he is a pyramid scholar." Which perhaps explains how setting himself apart from the rest might have propelled him in the direction of Islamic art and architecture.

"I'm not a guide in the traditional sense," Swelim says, and his crescendoing voice suggests

horror that anyone should make that mistake. "I would say my work is global, though on a Middle East level: Syria, Jordan, Yemen, Oman, the Gulf, and Morocco."

His tourists, for the most part, are students, professors, and affiliates of institutions such as Stanford, Harvard, the Smithsonian, and a host more.

"I'm more of a study leader than a tour guide," he says. "I give lectures -- academic lectures. In Egypt, for example, it is a part of trying to promote and enhance tourism here."

A point about which he feels especially passionate.

"Visiting Egypt shouldn't only be about Ancient Egypt. There are so many other things in Egypt," he says in a perfect English accent. "There is the Islamic element of the country's history."

Which is, he laments, almost completely ignored.

"When tourists come to Egypt, they stay, let's say, ten days, of which only half a day is oriented to Islamic [heritage], and the mosque they visit is the Mosque of Mohamed Ali, which is by no means the ideal example of Islamic architecture of Cairo."

Fired-up describes a fraction of Swelim's presence -- his sentences staccato, his hand movement angular, his voice excessively stern.

"It doesn't represent Egyptian Islamic architecture," he continues, pausing just long enough to catch his breath. "Egyptian Islamic architecture is Mameluke. Not Ottoman."

A much better place to go, he suggests, is the Mosque of Ibn Tulun. "It is exceptional," he says.

Swelim stops, and leans across the table.

"I think now is the time for a biscuit," he smiles.

Swelim's passion began at the Faculty of Tourism, where a professor by the name of Shahira Mehrez advised him to apply for a master's degree in Islamic Art and Architecture at the American University in Cairo (AUC).

"It was a huge shift from the Egyptian educational system to AUC," he chuckles. "You start to build up the character and ideas and opinions of an individual, rather than repeating what you have memorised. You actually start thinking about what you are saying. And you're treated as an individual."

It was Laila Ali Ibrahim, whom he calls his "godmother", who introduced Swelim to the buildings that would become his overriding interest.

"She took me around the monuments and ultimately had a great impact on me," he recalls fondly. "Tante Laila she became. She forced, imposed, clarified, made perfectly clear an important issue -- you cannot study Islamic architecture in the library. You have to go to the monuments, you have to deal with them and see them to understand the architecture. To study

Islamic architecture is to react to the monuments. You can read about them, but you won't understand them."

"Going into Islamic art rather than Egyptology was exciting because the monuments are there -- they're very close. If you study Saqqara, or Luxor, or Aswan, you have to travel there, but the monuments are just half an hour away from your home."



photos: Ayman Ibrahim

But that is not all.

"Every time you go, you see something different," he says. "If you concentrate on two monuments a day, you have a whole summer. You've filled up your summer, *khalas*, period. And not just one summer -- at least two. And you walk around, with your camera, observing, taking pictures"

But proximity is only part of the appeal.

"This accessibility made it more exciting," he says. "And then of course, it's different".

"How many people are studying Islamic art and architecture today?" he questions, "or at that time? It is a rarity."

He decided to take it further.

"Everyone was advising me to apply to Harvard for a PhD," he says, shaking his head in seeming recollection of the absurdity of the suggestion at the time. "I told them it was impossible. And of course I had no money," he half laughs.

He applied, and was accepted with a full fellowship to study under Oleg Grabar, one of the most

respected authorities on Islamic art and architecture.

"At the time I was working in tourism," he says. "I had been working as a guide since 1979. And a good guide," he laughs. "I was not desperate for a PhD. I already had a very good job here, great life, a wonderful social life, friends all over. So I went to Harvard!"

Finishing his requirements two years later in 1989 Swelim returned home to Cairo to begin work on his thesis, on the mosque of Ibn Tulun.

"It was then that I started guiding plus lecturing. I used to work with my father, we used to take the tours together," he says, explaining how his academic-oriented guiding began. "It was Peter Volk, the head of the Stanford Study/Travel Programme who suggested that I should share the lectures with my father, so I started on Islamic architecture, Islamic history. Then I went into other subjects, like 19th century paintings of Egypt; subjects people were not talking about, were not lecturing on, at that time."

He wanted to make his own lectures "different" from others. "And I wanted people to leave me thinking about what they have learned," he adds.

"In my teaching," he said of his position as assistant professor at AUC, "I try to do the same thing."

Juggling his time between his tour sites, his teaching, restoration work on *Bayt Al-Suhaymi* with Assad Nadim and Nawal El-Messiri, and his family, Swelim found himself drained of his usual zeal.

"It was exhausting, flying in to Cairo at 5am to teach a course at eight, and flying back to Aswan a few hours later to catch up with my tour," he says. "But I love teaching. I love to see a student learn. Just one student, even."

He decided, instead, to gather all his experiences together and put them into one package.

"I decided to expand, start leading tours outside of Egypt. I started with Syria and Jordan. I was fascinated by the wealth of their cultures, and by the variety. In Egypt there is just too much. Ancient Egypt, there's too much; Graeco Roman, Islamic, too much. Over there it's different. One day you're doing Crusaders, the next you're doing Islamic, the third Ancient."

"There is wonderful architecture in Syria, for example, that is either contemporary to Egypt or earlier," he says. "Where does Egypt fit in this history. It forced me to open my eyes and look at the country as part of a bigger, global evolution. It makes you understand and appreciate the architectural and cultural heritage more. And once you go to places like Dubai, with their modernism and flamboyance, it makes you more aware of Egypt's strengths, weaknesses, and the problems we are really encountering."

"Always when we're in Egypt we say that there is nothing like Egypt. But in what way?" he asks. "Yes, it is wonderful to be around Karnak, Edfu, the Mosque of Ibn Tulun, Qalawun and Sultan Hassan, but it is also wonderful to be visiting Crak des Chevaliers, Palmyra in Syria, Baalbak in Lebanon, and the Palace of Imam Ali in Yemen. It's important to see the rest of the region; it

puts Egypt in historical perspective -- deepens and enriches its history as you understand it."

This realisation propelled Swelim headlong into his regional lecturing, expanding his expertise from its core at the Mosque of Ibn Tulun to the rest of the Middle East, crossing the desert in four-wheel drives in Yemen, through Oman and the countries of the Gulf. There -- even in remote villages -- he became known as "the professor".

Swelim pauses.

"Just a moment, excuse me," he says, leaning over and pointing. "You have an eyelash under your eye. I always tell Karim and Farida [his children] to make a wish."

He pauses a moment more while the wish is made, then continues.

"I was the first to lead the Smithsonian Institute group into Syria and Jordan, the first to lead the American Museum of Natural History into Yemen and Oman, and I was asked to lead a group on the *Song of Flower* -- one of the most luxurious cruise ship in the world -- chartered by Harvard University. My groups were becoming more intellectual, more academic, much more diverse. I also occasionally did joint lecturing with people such as Wheeler Thaxton and Roger Owen from Harvard."

He thinks of himself, he says, as a lecturer to the world on the Middle East and Islamic world.

"Like I said, you can learn all you want about a place from a book, but you will never fully understand it unless you actually go there and interact -- with the architecture, with the people, with the culture. There is a difference."

A difference, too, in how he thinks, and what he hopes to achieve through his work.

"I want to revolutionise tourism, I want to create a new form of academic tourism, intellectual tourism."

And he wants, of course, to shed light on areas, monuments, and issues too often brushed aside.

"Architecture," he says, "is the art of motion, in a sense. You see a building, and it attracts you, so you want to enter. It may draw you in further, and you won't want to leave. You are experiencing good dynamic architecture," he continues. "An unsuccessful building is one you enter and want to leave right away. You don't fall into the context of its surroundings. Buildings have to relate to the mode of the people in them -- how they talk, dress, sit. The air and wind and light all need to be taken into consideration -- it has to blend into its surroundings and the culture and history and heritage of the area."

Take the Mosque of Ibn Tulun, for example.

"I always show it to people because it's a fantastic building. But what is fantastic? It is unique in that it is quite alien to Egyptian architecture in general -- its style is purely Iraqi-Mesopotamian. And there are interesting legends connected to the site where it was built."

"It's very simple, and has effects [of light and shade] that relates to the visitor, so your eye is constantly moving from one point to another. It is extraordinary."

Its history, is another story.

"It was never appreciated by Egyptians because it was never understood. It was seldom used for prayer, for example, because it had piers not columns. It was neglected and only revived later on during the Fatimid period."

The Fatimid vizir, Swelim says, would stand at the top of the mimbar after the Friday prayers and announce the taxes.

"Then at the time of Salaheddin it was used as a shelter for Maghrebi pilgrims -- a political tool that he used, allowing them to pass through Cairo on condition that they stayed in the mosque. In 1296, under the leadership of Sultan Lajin, it was re- revived, some elements were restored and added, then it just deteriorated during the time of Mohamed Ali and was converted into an asylum."

The theory is that Mohamed Ali wanted to get rid of people he did not want roaming about but lacked the funds to build a prison.

"It was only really given importance in modern times, because it brought in money to the government from the tourism industry."

But if the mosque now receives a great deal of attention from locals and foreigners alike Swelim still believes it is not yet receiving its due.

"It is unique. It has a spiral minaret and mosaic Mihrab. The monumental mimbar is the largest wooden piece of work of its kind -- a masterpiece. The dome over the fountain is unique. And the relation between the different elements of the mosque is incredible... the windows and arches propel people to walk around it. Everything in the building is unique: its history, reconstructions, architecture, legends."

Which is why, perhaps, so many years after his first introduction to the building, he has embarked on a project -- sponsored by the Dutch Institute -- to write a book on the mosque.

"Bored of going to Ibn Tulun? Or the sites?" he retorts, laughing at the absurdity of the thought. "When you like your job you never get bored. Besides, every time is different because the people in your group are different. You have to cater to their needs and desires and interests. You lecture to the intellectual level of your clients, and success, in this case is when you get on their wavelength and talk to them accordingly. If you give them too much they switch off, if you give them too little, they get bored. Once you give the right amount, you see it in their eyes -- they light up; they are yours."

"Our job is to teach them, and make sure they have a great day," he continues. "If you have a family you have to cater to the academic parents, but also to the kids. You have to make it exciting for them, make it an adventure. You actually have to talk to the children."

This, Swelim says, is critical to promoting Egypt and pushing it into a different global light.

"We need to promote the country. Our mass media, unfortunately, is on a totally different frequency than that of the West. We have to expose our culture to the world. We need to show them that we are well-educated, cultured, that we have a heritage and civilisation. It is our job to raise the awareness of the heritage of the country, to create a global cultural awareness of that heritage," he insists.

"Basic tours of Ancient Egypt are not going to do the job. We have a huge responsibility as guides -- whether academic or not. I get many people who have diverse and negative ideas about Egyptians, but as the days pass their impressions start to change. By the time they leave they are saying that they want to come back, and many have. That is the ultimate success of a guide."

And Swelim is undoubtedly successful. The key to a good adventure, *Newsweek International* wrote in a feature profiling the "five best guides in the world", is finding the right guide. And out of the five profiled, Swelim came out top.

"Lecturing is an art," he tells me as we are sitting in his Pyramids home, with *mashrabeya*, *shukhshaykhas* and *malqafs*. "There is always a build up and I know how to make the chemistry work with my groups. How? One is experience, and two is just being gifted, or talented, or lucky. You need to give correct information from its truest point. Then you have to test the intellectual level of the group. Then as it gets more and more serious, a joke has to break through. That is when the ice is broken, and from then on everyone is relaxed."

And what he does for his clients he does, too, for his children.

"Everyone in my family encouraged me to love and appreciate my Egyptian heritage," he says. "My father used to take me round the archaeological sites when I was a child. I used to enjoy the adventure, and that, now, is what I enjoy to do with my children. I try as much as possible to take them to the museums and sites and they love learning. When we are on vacation I take them and their friends on daily tours. Just a couple of hours here and a couple of hours there makes a world of difference. The result is that my children enjoy their cultural heritage and are aware of its beauty, importance and values."

One evidence of which, he says, is that his daughter fell in love with Tutankamun when she was four.

"When we returned to the museum later," he laughs, "she was furious that other people were admiring the king's throne because she considered it hers!"

It is a duty that he takes as seriously as his professional lecturing.

On a Tuesday afternoon Swelim answers his mobile, and abruptly asks if he can return my call later.

"I can't talk now," he says. "I'm on a trip with the kids. I'll have to call you back later. Half an hour."

It was a half-sentence question, but it is too late. The call has been ended. Swelim is at work.

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