

# 14 Egypt

## Women only beaches allow undisturbed sea swimming

IN Egypt, where some 80 per cent of women wear a hijab as a bare minimum, there is growing concern at the lack of privacy afforded those who wish to swim in the sea.

This is now changing thanks to the opening up of beach areas specifically segregated for women only. Four years ago the first of the women only beach clubs – called Yashmak – opened up and others quickly followed. The latest, La Femme, has made its appearance in the upmarket Cairo resort of Marina. Here women can bronze all over on sun beds, take part in belly-dancing contests and even breast feed their babies, knowing they are shielded by barriers of fertile vegetation and palm trees.

The protection even stretches out into the sea and guards not only watch all possible entrances to this private beach, but even search all bags brought in for hidden cameras that might be used for taking illicit pictures.

And yet it wasn't that long ago that Egypt was regarded as one of the most liberal of Arab countries. It was, after all, the first to give women the vote in 1956. Nowadays, there has been a rise in religious conservatism and although it is not a legal requirement for women to wear the hijab, many women claim they go to these clubs out of religious considerations. Not that the clubs are cheap. La Femme, for instance, charges \$14 per day rising to \$16 at weekends; so it has a fairly upmarket clientele. Those not so well off have to make do with the public beaches for both men and women where many girls wear sharia swimsuits that cover from the neck down to the ankles.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the women-only beaches are not popular with everyone – especially some of the more conservative men, who regard them as just another form of decadence. ■

*Brian Salter*