Minarets have always delighted the people of Cairo. Indeed they sometimes call their city "Cairo-of-the-thousand-minarets." In architectural terms, however, Cairo's medieval domes, largely unknown and at times unseen, are far more important and possibly even more beautiful.

They are not, to be sure, as impressive as the great domes swelling over Istanbul. And they are certainly not as obvious. Merely to see them you must go down into the narrow streets of the old city and search. But the domes of Cairo, nevertheless, are quite unlike any others and some are unique.

Centuries ago, when the domes of Isfahan and Samarkand were blossoming in profusion of mosaic splendor, the domes of Cairo were already in full flower. Unlike Samarkand's fabled turquoise domes - built in a day by craftsmen captured and brought back to build Islam's new desert city - Cairo domes had been evolving for hundreds of years and with little reference to the craftsmen of other lands in the great Islamic empire.

"...and their construction is so perfect that after six or seven hundred years they are still as complete as when they were built."
The very first “Cairo”, or Islamic style, dome, was built during the Fatimid rule in Egypt, specifically in the second half of the 10th century. Small, smooth and white-washed to a ghostly white, in sunlight or moonlight, these early Fatimid domes have since vanished into the anonymity of dull, somber colors almost lost in the midst of more imposing buildings from later ages.

But the small whitewashed dome was merely a beginning. By the time of the Ayyubids, Cairo’s home-grown craftsmen had developed their fine brickwork to the point where they could shape the domes into peaked and oval melons. And by the age of the Mamluk sultans, who governed the city for about 250 years, between A.D. 1250 and 1517, they were building both extensively and lavishly. For the Mamluks wanted monuments—imposing monuments to themselves—and to be sure they got what they wanted, they built their tombs within their own lifetime. Being exceedingly rich, each Mamluk ruler tried to outdo his predecessor until eventually their funerary palaces—each consisting of an imposing decorated dome, a soaring minaret, a mosque and a mausoleum—were as luxurious and spacious as the palaces they lived in.

To satisfy the need for grandeur, Mamluk domes grew to twice and three times the size of the earlier ones—thus demanding a radical change in the method of
construction. Instead of using small baked bricks, the craftsmen began to work with large stone blocks. Architecturally, this was a daring move; to build bigger domes was one thing, but to build them with stone blocks, instead of small bricks, called for not only extremely skilled stonemasons, but also engineers able to design and construct stronger and more massive structural bases.

The stone for the new domes was conveniently quarried in the nearby Mokattam Hills — no more than a mile away from the construction sites in the “cities of the dead.” Originally pure white, this stone, from centuries of hot desert winds and cooling Nile mists, has since weathered into the soft grays and browns that characterize the domes today.

As with the small domes, the craftsmen of Cairo — architects, engineers and masons — began to experiment with new shapes and, in the next 200 years, produced amazing results: domes that were fluted, domes that were both fluted and twisted — as though they were about to swirl off into space — and many others with elaborate embellishments chiseled directly onto the lovely white surfaces. Other experiments involved chevron designs — which, through pattern and shadow, suggested fluted domes — and still others adorned the stone with geometrical star patterns, stars and leaves together, and the interwoven foliage today called “arabesque.” As none of these patterns was easy to achieve — cutting an elaborate design onto a curved and receding stone surface called for a supreme level of skill — the domes with sculptured patterns emerged as an architectural triumph which moved a French consul to write:

“...in particular one cannot but marvel at their ornamentation. Some are fashioned to form a kind of lace-work, others are decorated compartments of flowers, or have parquet-type paneling or a melon-rib design, and these, let it be said, are among the more ordinary styles of ornamentation. Some of the more flamboyant domes are adorned with green and blue stones which heighten their effect still further... and their construction is so perfect that after six or seven hundred years they are still as complete as when they were built...”

As with so much of Islamic art, the identities of the Cairo craftsmen who produced it are largely unknown. But it is clear that they were master builders; alone,
and with little influence from other centers of Islamic architecture, they conceived domes that had not been built before—and have not been equaled since. They were, certainly, masters of decoration too, but decoration, in a sense, grew out of Islam itself. Because of Islamic prohibitions against the drawing of man or beast, the artisans who decorated Cairo's domes confined themselves to geometric designs—possibly expressions of crystal structure—and the floral vines clinging about them were but expressions of ordinary plant life.

Traditionally the highly decorated domes of Cairo were never put on mosques; instead they were constructed only on mausoleums—although it was also a tradition that a funerary mosque be attached to the mausoleum. Sometimes too, schools, libraries and even hostels were attached, thus creating the kind of impressive complexes of buildings such as those that stand today in ancient burial grounds to the north and south of medieval Cairo.

Here, where the most impressive domes can be found, are such examples as the complex built by Sultan Barquq and his two sons, Farag and Abd al-Aziz. One of the most magnificent medieval buildings in all of Cairo, it consists of two very large domed chambers containing the family tombs and, around a large central courtyard, a series of rooms and arcades leading to immense halls and a sanctuary of magnificent proportions. Not far away there is also Kait Bey's tomb, a masterpiece of architecture built in A.D. 1477. As in Sultan Barquq's tomb, the walls are lined with marble, the floors are paved in mosaic patterns and, set high in the walls, clusters of traditional stained-glass windows send shafts of startlingly intense colored light into the darkened interior.

Despite the somber nature of the tombs, their effect on observers is one of beauty rather than sadness. Instinctively, the eye looks upward—first to glittering pin-points of blue, red and green light filtering through tiny windows set in the massive stone walls, and then into the dome itself where, inevitably, it tracks the endless rim into a darkness that seems infinite. To many observers—and not only the faithful of Islam—it suggests a beauty beyond the experience of man and his most esthetic achievements.

John Fowley, a writer, photographer and film producer, writes regularly for Arabian World from Cairo.