

EXPLORING CIVILIZATION'S LONG OASIS

Egypt and the Nile - from Alexandria on the Mediterranean to Abu Simbel near the Sudanese border

Egypt is one of those exotic destinations that many dream of visiting, but it can be a long way from home and is located in a troubled part of the world. Still- in my travels I've found that most locals willingly accept tourists as guests in their countries and within generous limits, overlook the visitor's ignorance of language, religion and local customs. Such kindness is truly amazing since some tourists *are* ignorant, ungracious, stupid and ugly. Of course this hospitality is partly due to the money tourism brings into local economies but also (and importantly) because of the basic goodness of people everywhere, and in this the Egyptians were no exception.

27 & 28 October 2008 (Monday/Tuesday): Our friend Jim was kind enough to drive Laveta, Sharon, Russ and I to *Seattle-Tacoma International*. Traffic was unusually light and we arrived three and a half hours early. We were later joined at the gate by Karl, Zelda and Henry. Our British Airways Flight-48 to Heathrow lifted its wheels at 19:30 for our long overnight flight to the UK.

As always, Heathrow was a busy place. Although *Terminal-5* is new and nice, we had to deplane out on the apron and were bussed to the terminal, err... I mean shopping center. Still, Terminal-5 is a great improvement over the old Terminal-4.

British Airways Flight-155 pushed back from the gate at 16:55, bound for Cairo (*Al Qāhirah* in Arabic).

As we were gaining altitude, our 747 took a lightning strike on the left side. We saw the flash

(not the strike) but heard nothing over the roar of the engines. The captain leveled off for a few minutes to evaluate things before resuming our climb to altitude- then came on the address system to inform us of the strike and that assure us that everything was fine.

Heading eastward over the English Channel towards Berlin, we changed course east-southeast, passing between Munich and Salzburg to Dubrovnik- the Adriatic sea off our right wing, then crossing over Greece just south of Athens and on to the Greek Islands of the Aegean before heading nearly due south over the Mediterranean- and finally to Cairo, where we touched down at 23:30 hours.

We met our "Ihab", our *Trafalgar* representative at the gate, preceded though customs retrieved our bags then walked to our bus for a short, hairy ride through nighttime Cairo streets to our hotel, the *Fairmont Heliopolis*- a nice gated four star hotel with *lots* of security. Arriving around 01:30 the morning, we managed to get to bed around 02:30.

29 October, Wednesday: Laveta and I had breakfast with Henry and later joined by Sharon and Russ. This was our day of rest and Circadian Rhythm re-synchronization. We ate dinner together in the hotel's Lebanese restaurant around 18:00. I had Pigeon (actually two pigeons since they were so small) all washed down with *Obelisk*, an Egyptian wine good enough that our little group of seven managed to empty three bottles. The next day the tour began with a 03:30 wake up call.

30 October, Thursday: Our bus departed the *Helipolis* at 04:30 taking us back to Cairo International for our 06:45 *Egypt Air* flight to *Luxor*. On the coach we met “Ash”- our Trafalgar tour guide for the coming week. Once aloft and heading south, the low-level haze around Cairo gave way to sunny blue sky. Below us, the desert stretched out to the horizon broken only the *Green Land* of the Nile valley.

Deplaning, we were promptly bussed through town to the *Karnak* temple complex. There was a fair amount of poverty in the countryside and in the town. Most men wear *Galabiyas*, the traditional long dress-like garment, some clean, some dirty- depending on whether they’ve been working in fields, changing tires or clerking in stores. There was a great deal of lounging around, talking, playing card games or smoking *hookahs* (water pipes). Jeans were popular with boys. Older women commonly wore full length black dresses with scarves. Some wore *Nigabs* (full face veils) and a few *Burqa* like garments with only a slit for their eyes. Younger women commonly wore tight fitting jeans, pretty blouses and head scarves. I was surprised at the number of donkey carts and in the poor physical conditional of the donkeys.

Karnak temple is very extensive. The 137 columns of the 6000 sq. meter *Hypostyle Hall* are huge and imposing- a forest of stone and though the roof is long gone, there are massive stone lintels in place across many of the columns. Nearly all temple surfaces are covered with pictorial reliefs and hieroglyphs. There are statues of men, women, beasts, chimeras and even a large *Scarab* mounted on a pedestal which we were told to walk around at 3 times for luck, 5 times for marriage and 7 times for kids... a sort of “ring around the

Scarab”. The centerpiece of the temple is *Hatshepsut's* massive 343 ton obelisk of pink Aswan granite.

Re-boarding our coach at 11:00 we headed to our riverboat the *M/S Norma*, moored three out from the riverbank- requiring us to walk through two other boats to board it. The *Norma* is 72m (236 ft.) long x 13.6m (44.6 ft) wide. We had lunch aboard, and then settled into our cabins for a few hours break. In the afternoon we were driven a short distance to the *Luxor Temple* complex which though not as large as *Karnak*, is imposing nonetheless, beginning with the *Avenue of Sphinxes* leading to the *Pylon of Ramses II*, another obelisk and a very large statue of Ramses. The sun was heading for the horizon as we left for the boat so we walked through the complex in twilight.

We returned to *Karnak* later that evening for the “light show” and though a little long, it was a light and sound extravaganza. For me, it was an eerie sensation to be there in darkness and though it was selectively and beautifully illuminated, stars could still be seen overhead. The air was still and dry- the temperature perfect. We walked back to the bus in wonderfully Nile scented evening air.

Returning to the *Norma*, we had a late 20:30 dinner and went to bed.

31 October, Friday: We were on the road by 06:15 headed for the *Valley of the Kings*. Crossing the Nile by bridge we proceed west. The valley would be imposing even without the tombs of the pharaohs. We entered three tombs- Ramses the VII, IV and I in that order. Photography in the tombs was forbidden.

It was very hot in the tombs but the wall and ceilings were impressively decorated, especially in the colorful tomb of Ramses-I. The ceilings of all three were illustrated with the goddess *Nut* spanning the night sky of each tomb ceiling.

Back on our coach we headed to *Deir al-Bahri* and the temple of *Hatshepsut*, located in a spectacular natural amphitheater of rock cliffs. Impressive, but the sun's power focused by the surrounding escarpment was more impressive still. It was desiccatingly hot- so our stay was short.

Thirty minutes or so later we were in Tuhtmosis III Temple, *Medinet Habu*, a temple complex (including a temple for Rames III) in the best condition of any seen so far. The entrance pylons are 22m (72 ft.) high featuring sculpted military scenes.

Our day finished with a photo stop at the *Colossi of Memnon* statues- two 18m (60 ft.) statues of a seated *Amenhotep III*. In ages past they straddled the entrance to his temple. But the temple vanished long ago, leaving the statues isolated and lonely on the plain. Past triumphs forgotten, their faceless heads stare unblinkingly into an uncertain future... as do we all.

The *Norma* cast off around 12:30- disentangled is a better word since the cruise ships were all tied together due to limited berthing spaces along the shore. That evening the *Norma* passed through the locks at *Eсна* raising us six or seven meters before we continued our way upstream towards *Edfu* where we docked sometime during the night.

1 November, Saturday: Wake up was a late 07:30. By eight-thirty we'd boarded our coach for the short trip to *Edfu* and the late period *Temple of Horus*. The hawks of Horus still guard the *Gate of*

the Pylons. This temple complex though defaced by the Romans- was in wonderful condition to the point of still being roofed over!

Kom Ombo was our final temple of the day. Overlooking the Nile, it was built in the *Ptolemaic period*. A relatively small temple, it possesses a commanding position above the river. Temple highlights were the wonderful "high bias relief" carvings in a natural style.

As evening approached, lights illuminated the walls and pillars. The Moon and Jupiter (close together) stood out in the darkness. The temperature was again perfect with no insects or humidity. Beautiful and wonderful!

Our dinner aboard the *Norma* at 20:00 was in full Egyptian costume. Karl was the star looking the part of Lawrence of Arabia. Laveta and Z best dressed of all. In costume I just looked dorky. A party began in the bar at 21:00 but Laveta and I went to bed instead.

2 November, Sunday: Wake up was at 05:00, then breakfast and we were out the door at 06:20 heading to *Aswan*, first the Low Dam (built with help from the British) and then the *High Dam* (with help from the Russians).

We took a motorboat to *Philae* and the *Temple of Isis*. The boats being the most beat up watercraft imaginable... and of course there were no lifejackets. Isis is a small but interesting temple that was saved from the rising waters of *Lake Nasser*.

We also visited the famous Aswan quarry where the ancient Egyptians mined their famous pink granite obelisks. The highlight was the famous *Unfinished Obelisk* that cracked before being completely cut loose from the surrounding rock

and was therefore abandoned... around 3500 years ago! Granite is hard and they only metal tools available then were of bronze, too soft for such a task, so they cut through the granite with even harder *Diorite* “bowling balls” by pounding them against the granite over and over, ad-infinitum. If this sounds impossibly tedious, it surely was, but it worked. Trenches in the granite made by those *Diorite* balls still look fresh after thirty-five centuries. How the obelisks were moved from the quarry, barged down the Nile and erected at temples is hard to imagine. Hatshepsut’s obelisk we saw in Karnak is 28.58m (94 ft.) long and weights 343 tons!

Laveta’s stomach was acting up, so we passed up the afternoon *Felucca* ride to Kitchener’s island. Actually, it was a good time to get caught up on sleep.

3 November, Monday: We left the M/S *Norma* for the last time as we headed to *Aswan International Airport* for our Egypt Air flight 371, south to *Abu Simbel*, which took about 35 air minutes on our Embraer-170 jet. The route took us over a great deal of barren dessert, broken by Lake Nasser spreading ever southwards towards the border with Sudan. Our coach was ready for us and swiftly took us to Ramses-II’s *Abu Simbel* monument consisting of four gigantic statues of the seated Pharaoh, carved from a sandstone hillside. Another somewhat smaller monument to his wife *Nefertari* lies about 200 meters away. Both of these monuments would have been under the water of Lake Nasser had they not been carved up and relocated about 65 meters (213 ft.) higher. The work was done so well that it’s difficult to see any re-assembly joints. The statues are impressive

even to modern eyes. They must have scared the hell out of the ancient Nubians- which was most certainly their intent.

A few hours later we boarded Egypt Air flight 374 back to Aswan and after a 45 minute layover to let off and pick up passengers (we stayed on-board) we headed north to Cairo, over-flying the pyramids towards the end. Approaching Cairo, the size of the city became apparent. It’s a very large city of eighteen or so million and it took about an hour for our coach to work its way through this very crowded metropolis to our hotel. Traffic was vicious, operating with no rules at all, lanes, traffic-lights, crosswalks, speed limits (even one way streets) have no meaning in Cairo- the most frightening place to drive I’ve ever seen.

Our coach finally brought us to the *Ramses Hilton*, a large modern hotel, located downtown just across the road from the Nile. Lots of security here- including bomb sniffing dogs that check out every car and an x-ray machine located in the lobby. As evening approached we ate (and drank) in the hotel pub, the “Sherlock Holmes” before retreating to our rooms and crashing.

4 November, Tuesday (and Election Day at home): The hotel had a first rate buffet breakfast with a good variety. We boarded our coach at 07:20 we headed for the *Citadel of Salah Al-Din* and the alabaster mosque of *Mohammad Ali* which was large, beautiful, and magnificently located overlooking the city. Removing our shoes, we entered and explored. Next was the *Mosque and school of Sultan Hassan*, a smaller, though still large, much older and I think more beautiful mosque. Again we removed our shoes, this time handing them to an attendant as we entered.

Next was the church of *St. Mary* a small but pretty Coptic church.

Driving a short distance to the *Cairo Museum*, we spent the next three and a half hours in this old, very large and somewhat dilapidated building filled (stuffed is a better word) with the most extraordinary antiquities on earth. While we saw many wonderful things, the mummy of Ramses-II was for me the most poignant. There, under glass, with arms crossed over his chest as they have been for over three thousand years- Ramses patiently awaits eternal life. In front of me lay the remains of one of civilization's most famous rulers- and builder of the *Abu Simbel* monument we had just seen the day before!

In the evening we attended a sound and light show on the Giza plateau. I did get some good nighttime photos of the sphinx and pyramids. The best part was the nighttime bus ride through Cairo, from downtown to suburbs and on to small town outskirts. Egyptians truly live a social life in the streets which were packed with pedestrians, cars and donkey carts. Stores and eateries were busy. By now I've become used to cars driving around at night without headlights (they do use running lights and flash their headlights- as a visible horn). With city/town streetlights, illumination is adequate and there's no headlight glare to ruin night vision. Strangely, it seems to work.

5 November, Wednesday: After breakfast in the Hilton we boarded our bus for the Pyramids, walking from the coach to the first great pyramid of Khufu (Cheops) where Sharon & Russ, Karl and Zelda had tickets to go inside. Laveta and I then walked to the other great pyramid Khafre (Kefren) where Laveta and I went inside. The long passa-

ge-way was only about 1.2m (4 ft.) high, narrow and sloped steeply downward for what seemed like about 40m (130 ft.) then ~20 meters level with the ceiling high enough to walk upright before the ceiling dropped to about 1.2m again as the passage angled steeply upward for another ~40m, followed by a level section before entering the ~14m x 5m x 6m high burial chamber- the size of a very large bedroom (in this case the bedroom's for eternity so it needs to be roomy).

The high roof was V-shaped, ceiling and walls plain with no artwork, except that on one wall was painted in large letters the name of its discoverer, Giovanni Belzoni and the date, 1818.

It was very hot and very humid in the pyramid which may have been due to us tourists since ventilation is essentially non-existent. It was hard to imagine anyone working in the tomb for any length of time without air conditioning.

We left the way we entered- duckwalking our way down and up, back to the exit. We had sore leg muscles for days afterwards.

Walking to where the coaches were parked we were bussed to the *camel parking lot* where we boarded i.e. mounted our camels for our desert ride. The tricky part of camel riding is when it rises from, or descends to the sitting position, at which point it's easy to fall off forward- which would surely piss the camel off. Camels don't appear to be happy creatures- they groan a lot, spit and bite but riding them was easy... actually pleasant. We rode far enough to lose sight of the busses- then it was just us, the pyramids and the dessert. Most of our mounts were tethered together... a camel train, though Henry, Sharon, and Zelda's camels were free to wander at their own pace. It was quite an adventure.

After our ride, we paid our respects to the *Sphinx* where we took more photos, up close, front and rear.

We then made our way to Imhotep's *Step Pyramid* at *Saqqara*. *Imhotep* the great pyramid designer was one of only a few commoners ever to be accorded divine status. This was the Egyptian's first try at a pyramid. It's crumbling now and some restoration was underway on two sides. In the distance was the *Bent Pyramid*, an improvement that led to the (later) true pyramids.

After a neat lunch at an outdoor restaurant that grilled the food right at our table, we motored to *Memphis* and the *Mit Rahina Museum* to view the large horizontal statue of Ramses-II.

In the evening, we were bussed to the river for a dinner cruise on the Nile. The food was good, as was the entertainment- singing, belly-dancing and even a *Whirling Dervish*. Going up to the top deck- open to sky and breeze on a lovely night. There we experienced the multitude of lights that is nighttime Cairo including those reflected off the river. The dinginess of the city dissolved in the shadows, revealing sparkling vistas all around.

6 November (Thursday): We were up early (again) for our coach ride to Alexandria. The trip took about three hours through towns, farmland, and desert. As we proceeded north we entered delta marshland and lakes. Alexandria is the second city of Egypt with a population of around six million. Founded by *Alexander the Great*, it sprawls over twenty miles of coastline. We visited the *Catacombs of Kom al-Shuqafah* which were mixture of Egyptian /Greco-Roman styles.

Next, we visited *Pompey's pillar*, dedicated to the Roman emperor *Doiocletian* in 291AD, then

traveled across *Faros Island*, where we stopped at *Quitbay Citadel*, a fortress located at the site of the famous lighthouse of antiquity. After a walking tour of the fortress, overrun with kids (and their teachers) on school outings, we went on to visit a small but well preserved Roman theater.

Lastly we visited the *Alexandria Museum*, having on display artifacts from Egypt's *Pharaonic* period, Greek period and Christian and Islamic artifacts. Traffic was heavy so we stopped midway at a McDonalds and ate on the coach. We returned to our Cairo hotel around 18:00.

At the hotel Russ and I went to the business center, got online and selected seat assignments and printed our boarding passes for the following day's flight. The youngsters went out for Pizza while I headed for the hotel pub where Henry joined me for drinks and a snack.

7 November (Friday): We left the hotel at 05:45. By now we were getting good at navigating airports. British Airways-flight-154, a 747 was waiting to take us to London where BA-49 (another 747) flew us home to Seattle.

It was a great trip. We had an exhausting and wonderful time, but it's always good returning home. Last night we slept in Cairo- tonight we'll sleep in our own beds.

Afterthoughts: Trafalgar took good care of us as usual. The tour certainly covered major Egyptian highlights and we were on the go pretty much the whole time.

We were up and out early nearly every day which allowed us to arrive at our destinations before they were overrun with other tourists. And other than normal traveler's intestinal issues (Pha-

raoh's revenge) we experienced no medical problems, which was a good thing since hospital facilities outside of Cairo are substandard.

Russ, Karl and Laveta were the only ones who didn't take a fall at some time during the tour. The rest of us tripped up at one time or another. Egypt you see is not a user friendly place. In temples and other monuments, paving stones are often uneven, have potholes and drop-offs and of course you're looking up much of the time- so it's easy to trip up. I did.

Egypt was everything I'd hoped for, though there were surprises. There was more poverty than I'd anticipated. Of course with Egypt's birth rate, no economy could keep up. The locals were friendly, tolerant and I saw no evidence of religious discrimination.

Cell phones were in use everywhere.

The schoolchildren that we saw were on the whole well groomed, polite and happy. And it was common for them (especially the girls) to practice their English on tourists- which gave us great pleasure. Egypt is blessed with beautiful children.

Beggars were few but there were lots of people aggressively hawking tourist items. Tipping (ba-keesh) is universally expected for even non-requested services. This resulted in awkward situations because we tended to refuse even small offers of kindness or pleasantries from Egyptians thinking that payment was expected. So we may at times appeared unfriendly, even though we would have been delighted with contact.

Security in Egypt was extensive. Armed police were everywhere- with their AK47's. X-ray machines were *de rigueur* at hotels, museums and monuments. We had bomb sniffing dogs outside

our hotel and plain-clothes security in our coach. And because of (or perhaps in spite of) those things Egypt felt safe- except when in a moving vehicle, or as a pedestrian crossing a road!

Ancient Egypt is certainly awe-inspiring. The temples are striking- with their pylons, hieroglyph covered columns, statues and obelisks. Egyptian museums are full of priceless treasures... and those incredible pyramids leave their imprint in one's mind that endures long after the return home.

Finally there's the Nile, *Egypt's long oasis* and the source of *everything* in Egypt both ancient and modern. A river if irrigation (life itself in an arid land) a river of commerce, a river of civilization... a river of time. Floating on its surface you can (if you set your mind to it) commune for a short while with those who passed this way long ago... then awoken to the present refreshed and enriched. There is surely a little Nile water in civilization's DNA.

The US presidential election occurred while were in Egypt and for the next couple of days a few Egyptians went out of their way to congratulate us on Obama's election victory. And there were others who envied us for having a real democracy and said so wistfully.

Near the end of our trip, we met three female college students at the new *Library of Alexandria* who told us how much they wanted to come to America, which they saw as a place of freedom and opportunity... which of course it is.

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