

Historic Sites Visits Bring Understanding of Past, Present

Editor's Note: In this week's final article, Rev. Michael Bausch, pastor of the United Church of Christ, Williams Bay, writes of his recent visit to Egypt.

By Michael Bausch

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After nine days in Israel, our tour group boarded a bus for the 12-hour ride from Jerusalem to Cairo, Egypt. Within a few hours, we were at the Egyptian border at the Sinai Peninsula. Our journey across the desert skirted the Mediterranean Sea, and afforded views of many Bedouin homes, constructed of palm fronds and corrugated tin. The highway was often reduced to one lane by blowing sand, and at one point we encountered a group of 200 bicyclists ready to begin a race on the highway. Luckily, we arrived before the race began, or we would have been delayed quite a lot of time.

On our approach to the Suez Canal, we saw the remains of Egyptian tanks and trucks, destroyed in the fighting with Israel in 1967. At the Suez Canal, our bus drove onto a ferry for the three or four-minute trip to Egypt.

Cairo was a unique experience. All drivers sound their horns constantly, and mixing with the autos, cabs, and packed buses were horse-drawn vehicles, donkeys, and camels. At one point, we spotted a flat bed truck upon which rested six or seven camels, watching the traffic and people around them. People wear all styles of clothing, both traditional Arab garb with flowing robes and headress, and modern clothing with suits and ties for the men, and skirts and blouses for the women. School-aged children wear a tan uniform. Soldiers, seen throughout Cairo, wear black wool uniforms, and carry rifles with unsheathed bayonets. The streets of Cairo are safer than those of many American cities, and we always ran into Egyptians smiling at us and saying, "welcome to our country." We felt a particularly warm welcome the night Egypt beat Algeria in soccer to win a spot in the 1984 Olympics. Throngs of cheering, happy people would spot our group and ask to have pictures taken with the Americans.

View of Pyramids

Our hotel was just to the west of Cairo, across the Nile River, in Giza, the site of the famous pyramids built nearly 4,500 years ago. I was treated to a most spectacular sight upon arriving at my hotel room. As I opened the curtains and walked onto the balcony, I saw before me the three pyramids at sunset. In fact, the sun set upon the tip of the Great Pyramid in those brief spell-binding moments.

The view from my room told a lot about Egyptian life. Directly behind the hotel was a small field, and each day a peasant family slowly chopped the clover and loaded it upon their donkey and camel. Just behind their plot of ground was a new suburban housing development under construction, and behind that, the plateau upon which rested the pyramids.

Every tourist must ride a camel in Egypt, and so we rode a mile or so to the Great Pyramid. We climbed 20 or 30 feet up the side of the pyramid before entering and ascending to the burial chamber of the pharaoh Chephren. Seeing the massive stones on the pyramid's interior (some weighing 15 tons), all cut to perfection and fitted rather than cemented in place, we marveled at the ancient architectural and building skills.

Valley of Kings

Touring Cairo and the pyramids at Giza was spectacular, but other wonders awaited us. We boarded an overnight train for the 12-hour trip along the Nile River to Luxor, site of the ancient capital of Thebes. Luxor is known for its two

massive temples, and its proximity to the final resting place of the pharaohs, the Valley of the Kings.

Several times during the night, I awoke to watch the moon glistening on the peaceful Nile River, and I was spellbound by its beauty. The next morning I saw small villages along the lifeblood of Egypt come to life themselves, and watched men and children walking and riding donkeys to their fields for the day's labor. Women and smaller children could be seen resting outside their mud-brick homes, welcoming the morning sun.

Arriving in Luxor, we wasted no time after crossing the Nile by boat, and were driven to the Valley of the Kings. Even in the winter (February) temperatures get quite warm, and the relentless sun beats down upon the dry sands. Early touring is always advisable. Because of no rain in this area, the Valley of the Kings is truly a valley of death. There is no life anywhere, no green, only the sun, the wind, and the rocks. We entered four tombs, most notably those of Rameses VI and the boy king, Tutankhamen.

Walked in Tombs

The tombs were cut into the mountains, and were constructed during the entire lifetime of the pharaoh. The builders had anywhere from six years to several decades to build, and the more spectacular tombs were those built over a longer span of time. Cut some 300 feet into the rock, with wall paintings and hieroglyphic reliefs surviving 3500 years, the tombs were works of art. At the end of the descent would be the burial chamber, sometimes with massive columns surrounding the sarcophagus, and always with pictures depicting the afterlife of the dead pharaoh. Treasures were stored in rooms along the passageway.

The tomb of Tutankhamen was discovered in 1922, and had been virtually intact. These treasures have circulated to the U.S. in recent years, and now are at their permanent resting place, the Egyptian Museum, in Cairo. The mummy of King Tut has been returned to his tomb in the Valley, and he now rests beneath one of the famous gold coffins, in the original burial chamber.

We returned to the city of Luxor, where we toured the great temple of Karnak, whose beginnings stretch back to the 20th century B.C. Massive pylons and columns still stand, along with obelisks, ram-headed sphinxes, and wall-reliefs that defy description. Most of the hieroglyphic work describes the conquests of the great pharaohs during their golden age, and one can imagine the white-robed priests offering songs and prayers to the god-king. It was from this temple that the great funeral processions to the Valley of the Kings originated, with a solemn walk through the avenue of the sphinxes, a loading onto wooden craft on the Nile, and procession to the depths of the stony hills on the western edge of the Nile, the place where the sun sets.

Modern Egypt

After a full day in Luxor, we boarded our overnight train to return to Cairo. A remaining free day was spent exploring the streets of modern Cairo, including a visit to the American University and an old college friend, who is now Dean of Students. The Egypt that is emerging out of its long and great past is a land struggling to build its economy, to alleviate vast poverty, and to maintain a moderate perspective in the Arab world.

Travel brings greater understanding. Egypt has given me a respect for its long and enduring history, and new Arab friends for whom I have greater empathy.